

The Dynamics of the South Korea—United States Security Alliance and Great Power Politics on Regional Strategic Stability

This paper will first introduce the framework of strategic stability used in this study, follow by Republic of Korea-United States (ROK-US) security relations from post-Korean War until the end of Cold War. The paper will later trace the great powers interactions involving the US, ROK, China, and Japan during the post-Cold War era from 1991 until 2008, with intertwining events of how China is balancing US power in the Korean and Taiwan theaters and how did Japan place itself on regional stage amidst the conflicts and crises in the region. The paper will be concluded by summarizing on how the ROK-US security alliance and regional powers had played a massive role in stabilizing or destabilizing Northeast Asia.

1.0 Introduction: strategic stability as the goal of regional security cooperation

The concept of strategic stability used in this study is vital to look at how the main actors were positioned in the discourse of Northeast Asian security. Based primarily on Zhong and Pan (2004) and Loo (2005), this study defines the concept of strategic stability as an enduring situation, in which various strategic forces in the world are able to establish and sustain a strategic framework for basic relations between and among them, and an adequate sense of security. Strategic stability is based on a condition that *minimises the possibility of accidental wars* breaking out between adversarial states, where policy-makers do not face unavoidable pressures to make sudden shifts from non-violent to violent strategies, and in which various strategic forces in the world (or region) are able to establish and *sustain a strategic framework* for basic relations between and among them. Reflecting generally a balance of force, and moreover a balance of core interests among major powers, strategic stability is usually based on certain military and security arrangements through legally binding mechanisms or other institutions. Strategic stability of Northeast Asia thus is closely related to the status quo of superpowers in the region, the U.S. alliance systems and norms of behavior in international relations. In a situation of strategic stability, there is little incentive for any major power to change unilaterally these existing arrangements by force.

2.0 ROK-U.S. security relations and alliance in the post-1945 era

The U.S. became involved in Korean affairs after 1945, and it has since then the significant other of Korea, especially for the South. It has helped established a military government in the South that lasted from 1945 until 1948, and fought the communist in defense of the South Korean government during the Korean war which was erupted in 1950. During this period, Shin (2010) noted that the U.S. has not only shaped South Korea's anti-communism identity that lasted for almost 50 years, but also helped shaping the North Korea's anti-imperialist and anti-Americanism national identity.¹

¹ It is known that the DPRK regime has been seeking to normalize its relationship with the U.S., while rhetorically condemn the U.S. as the evil imperialist to the world (except South Korea where North Korean media is banned to the public) through its national news agency.

When the Korean War ended with an armistice in 1953, the U.S. and South Korea signed the ROK-U.S. Mutual Security Agreement in 1954, in which they agreed to defend each other in the event of outside aggression. Since then, the main pillar of ROK-U.S. relations has been the military alliance. On the other hand, the U.S.' large amount of economic and military aid should not be overlooked in the ROK's later accomplishment in economic growth. According to Shin (2010), between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, roughly 50 percent of the ROK annual budget came from the U.S. aid. Furthermore, the U.S. provided \$9 billion in military aid to the ROK between 1955 and 1978.² Beginning in early 1960s, the ROK was able to increase its regional and global reach, by combining its economic dynamism with significance from strategic gains, without damaging its alliance with the U.S.³ The strength of the military alliance was further strengthened during the Vietnam War, where South Korean Park Chung-Hee government sent troops to Vietnam in 1965 and 1966, at the request of the U.S. The contribution of the ROK's armed forces had also bolstered South Korea's economy via corollary networking, which furthered strengthened the alliance.⁴ At the same time, South Korea normalized its relations with Japan in 1965 under U.S. pressure and a virtual trilateral security alliance has been formed since, which at the time provided the U.S. a strategically forward deployed position in Northeast Asia, at the heart of China, Soviet Union, and Japan. This virtual trilateral alliance remains to be the important U.S. military foothold until today (Cho 2003; Shin 2010).

The 1980s saw South Korea in the transition of becoming a democratic nation after decades of military rule. It is also in the 80s that the first anti-Americanism was noted among the public, resulting from the U.S.' non-intervention in one of the major democracy crises in the ROK, the Gwangju Uprising, where the people were massacre by the military government because of the protest while they expected the U.S. to intervene. Despite this resentment, the mass public still believed in the security alliance, which showed the anti-Americanism was not necessary anti-alliance at the time, when anti-communism was still important.

However, in the late 80s when communism in Europe and Soviet Union signaled signs of collapse, Nordpolitik was introduced and is the signature of Roh Tae-Woo government's foreign policy. Anti-communist ideology was significantly weakened and the South Korean government tried to reach out to China and Soviet Union not only to improve economic cooperation but also to isolate North Korea so that it would be left with no choice but to open up itself and hence reduce military tension on the peninsula. According to Lee Sang Ock, foreign minister of the ROK during his speech in 1991, the U.S.-ROK alliance was the cornerstone of the Seoul government's Nordpolitik to improve relations and ultimately reunify with North

² During the same period, the U.S. provided only \$3.2 in military aid to all African and Latin countries combined. See Shin Gi-wook, 2010, *One Alliance, Two Lenses*.

³ The ROK-U.S. alliance was not free of political problems between the two countries, caused by the clashes of the Korean military-linked governments of Rhee Syng-man, Park Chung-Hee, and Chun Doo-hwan with the Korean public and the U.S. economy burden to support the post-war South Korea. However the economic success achieved by the South Korea from drawing the U.S.-influenced capitalist model had brought the ROK-U.S. relationship into a greater harmony of client-mentor interaction despite political frictions (E. A. Olsen 2005, *Korea, The Divided Nation*, p. 132).

⁴ It is also worth mentioning that the Assembly and the public at the time opposed the idea. So in exchange, the U.S. government agreed to provide additional military funds to Korea to modernize its armed forces, totaling about a billion dollars.

Korea (Holden May 5, 1991). The U.S. supported the ROK's initiative by four means which includes encouraging unofficial, nongovernmental visits from the DPRK, facilitating the travel of U.S. citizens to the DPRK, revised trade regulations to permit commercial exports from the DPRK of goods that meet basic human needs, and U.S. diplomats may hold substantive discussions with DPRK counterparts in neutral settings.⁵ Though Nordpolitik has successfully normalized South Korea's relations with China and Russia, the outcome of this diplomatic success was supposedly a road to Pyongyang led through Beijing and Moscow, but instead it pushed North Korea into a state where its regime survival was in question. Hence, after the end of Cold War the situation on the Peninsula was not getting any better as the DPRK started to pursue the development of weapon of mass destruction by all means that escalated tension on the peninsula for the past two decades.

3.0 Post-Cold War ROK-U.S. security relations

An alliance presupposes a common threat to its security. The ROK-U.S. security alliance has been the main anchor for maintaining the Northeast Asian strategic stability, aiming at balancing and deterring the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and its communist allies. The power balance shift has occurred as the world entered Post-Cold War era after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which caused the DPRK lost its most prominent ally and the People's Republic of China (PRC) becomes the remaining single ally for DPRK in Northeast Asia. During this course of the change in history of the world, the role of ROK-U.S. alliance remains vital and able to adapt themselves in different situations and serve the alliance purpose well.

3.1 Kim Young-Sam administration

Right after the end of Cold War, the so-called first nuclear crisis on the peninsula occurred in the early 1990s. The corresponding ROK and U.S. governments at this time facing the differences in their North Korea policy. Clinton administration was at first ready to go to war with the North Korea, but later reverse its position and changed its policy to engagement policy and an agreed framework is signed at Geneva in 1994. The engagement policy was at odd with the Kim Young-Sam administration, particularly with the president who is a conservative-leftist that sees North Korea as an enemy that cannot be trusted. President Kim Young-Sam was suspicious of the value of what was known as a package deal. He pointed out that North Korea in the past agreed on a package deal but when it came to implementation, it selected only those in its self-interest. The message President Kim tried to convey to President Clinton was "you may trust but you also must verify".

There was insecurity in the South Korean government in which they see the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework has changed the alliance's characteristics which some sees as the turning point and crisis in the partnership. Though many supports the part played by South Korea in building light water reactors (LWRs) stated in the

⁵ Conboy (1991), Speech by Karl Spence Richardson, Director of the Office of Korean Affairs at the Department of State, Asian Studies Center Forum, Easing Cold War Tensions on the Korean Peninsula: Options for U.S. Policy Makers, LECTURE #292, The Lehrman Auditorium, The Heritage Foundation, September 11, 1990, Washington, D.C.

Agreed Framework, nonetheless it is more of a U.S.-DPRK agreement that tries to single out the ROK's active involvement in resolving the crisis and North-South engagement. There were worries among the conservatives that the closer the DPRK is to the U.S., the more the ROK is alienated from the reconciliation process on the peninsula.⁶ However Clinton administration had reassured their Korean counterpart by reiterating the importance of alliance through declaring new commitments to maintain the U.S. troops in Korea through two visits in 1994 and 1995 (Khil & Hayes 1997). The 1995 East Asia Security Review (EASR) also reiterated the U.S. commitment to the ROK security. In return, Kim Young-Sam paid a visit to Washington in July 1995 to reaffirm the strength of the ROK-U.S. alliance.

3.2 Kim Dae-Jung administration

When Clinton administration was overlapping with Kim Dae-Jung administration, the relations between ROK and U.S. has never been since the World War II (Scalapino 2002). The progressive-rightist government of Kim Dae-Jung and Clinton administration that ran on the "New Democrats" platform shared similar values and North Korea engagement policy.

The ROK-U.S. alliance can be strengthened further if both governments form a united front on North Korea (Park 2005). However the problem on forming the united front is troubled since the Sunshine policy of Kim Dae-jung was introduced in 1998, in light of the Inter-Korean Summit held in year 2000. The said policy has changed public and even progressive policymakers' perception that North Korea is no longer a threat. While the core belief of the alliance is to see North Korea as a major threat to be deterred and the reason for the troops stationed in Korea, such policy has undermined the purpose of USFK and also the existence of the alliance, inevitably leading to rising anti-Americanism that there is no more reason for the U.S. to stay in Korea. The Ministry of National Defense which is more of the conservatives was increasingly frustrated over not being able to brand the DPRK a threat (Cossa 2005; Kim 2005).⁷ Kim Dae-Jung administration's drastic shift from security-first policy to the peace-oriented unification policy has brought confusions, debates, and conflicts among groups in the South and also to its ally.

3.3 Roh Moo-Hyun administration

Roh Moo-Hyun inherited his predecessor's Sunshine policy, created the Peace and Prosperity Policy, which further provided many investments and aids to the North despite the missile tests that had angered the international community. In August 2003, Roh Moo-Hyun stressed the importance of self-reliant defense capability, since then the U.S. and the conservatives feared that this will compromise the ROK-U.S. alliance. The Bush administration had a difficult time dealing with Roh's government as the

⁶ According to Scott Snyder (December 30, 2009), the alliance is the main factor in the emergence of U.S.-ROK-DPRK triangular relations that has limited North Korea's capacity to improve one relationship while neglecting the other. Effective U.S.-ROK alliance cooperation makes the two countries' relationships with North Korea parallel and interactive: progress in one is likely to require progress in the other while a failure to improve one relationship will act as a limiting factor constraining the development of the other. This dynamic has proven to be true during the past two decades.

⁷ The government removed the term "enemy" in referring to North Korea in its Defense White Paper.

anti-Americanism sentiment is at the highest in the history of bilateral relationship between the two countries (Choi & Park 2009; Chae 2010). In October 9, 2006, North Korea conducted the nuclear test and confirmed its status as de facto nuclear weapon state. The first North Korean nuclear test observed the Roh administration downplaying the tension and taking a conciliation stance. Despite facing criticism from the conservatives, President Roh remained certain of his national security doctrine of self-reliant national defense and together with the progressive forces claimed that nuclear test by North Korea was resulted from Bush administration's hard line North Korea policy (Shin 2010).

3.4 Lee Myung-Bak administration

While the conservatives was taking over the ROK government by Lee Myung-Bak administration in 2008, the ROK-U.S. relations is poised to change for the better. The Lee Myung-Bak government has suggested a North Korea policy of "mutual benefits and co-prosperity"⁸ rather than the reconciliation and cooperation policy of the "People's Government" during the Kim Dae Jung presidency or the peace and prosperity policy of the "Participatory Government" during the Roh Moo Hyun administration (Yang 2009). The Lee administration has pledged to "restore the alliance with the U.S. based on the established friendship" as the primary anchor of South Korea's foreign policy (Snyder 2009). Though Washington welcomed the affirmation by South Korea on the importance of their military alliance, the inter-Korean relations which has become a lower priority in Lee's administration has increased public's discontent at home.

The second nuclear test by the DPRK in 2009 saw Lee Myung-Bak administration has sharply departed from the earlier administration's response and taking hard stances on North Korea's actions, condemning the test (Fackler and Choe 2009).

3.5 Summary and current ROK-US relations

During the post-Cold War era, the confluence of internal and external transitions is pushing the two countries together but at the same time also pulling them apart. The challenge for alliance managers is to navigate these conflicting currents toward a mutually agreeable destination while keeping the alliance afloat. No matter how diverge were the policies of these allies, on the bottom line they have a common ground that is to avert the war on the Peninsula.

Currently, with the conservative-leftist government in power plus the strengthening of democracy in South Korea, the two countries hold same political values and on the economic collaboration. The both have signed the ROK-U.S. free trade agreement (KORUS FTA) in 2007, if approved by Congress after Obama's visit to South Korea for the next G-20 meeting in November 2010, would be the most commercially significant FTA for the U.S. in nearly 20 years (USTR 2010).

⁸ It is based on the concept of denuclearization, opening, and raising the per-capita national income of North Korea to 3,000 USD.

4.0 ROK-US alliance and their interactions with China and Japan

One of the major purpose/reasons for the continuation of ROK-US alliance is to balance the regional giants, China and Japan. On top of the North Korean nuclear threat and crises involving conventional incidents, the rise of China and the Korean-Japanese hostility are also the cases for the U.S. presence through its allies in the region.

4.1 China

China's interests and policies towards the two Koreas stem from Beijing's long-term desire to assert China's traditional influence over the Korean Peninsula, one of the key bordering regions along with South China Sea, Central Asia, and South Asia regions. Despite China's declaration as a non-aligned country, it has a defense treaty with DPRK that inevitably caused the siding of China with DPRK during tensions and crises on the Peninsula. Shen Dingli (2006) argued that DPRK is a key buffer zone between China and the U.S. troops stationed in South Korea, and it is also tied to China's Taiwan contingency. With a shared border of 1,400 kilometers, DPRK acts as a guard post for China against U.S. troops in South Korea, thereby allowing China to redeploy military assets away from northeast China towards Taiwan straits. China sees a successful Taiwan Independent movement would threaten China's legitimacy and sovereignty (O'Connor 2004). In case of a possible U.S. involvement in the Taiwan Strait conflict, China is more worried of U.S. troops in Japan as the forces there are deployable, unlike U.S. troops in Korea which are stationed there solely for the purpose of North Korea deterrence.

The value of U.S. troop in Korea to China is that it prevents the attack by either sides thus maintains status quo and therefore ensuring stability in Northeast Asia. China has not openly challenge the status of ROK-US alliance, recognizing that any objections would be ignored and fears that the overt opposition to the U.S. military presence would reaffirm the U.S. that China's rise is an aggressive one rather than a peaceful rise as always claimed by the Chinese government. Without any open statements, China acknowledges that U.S. alliances and forces in the region have benefited not only China but also Asia in general since the postwar period. The alliances has served has the stabilizer in the region that prevents economical collapse though the PRC together with Soviet Union were seen as enemies to be deterred during the Cold War. In the post-cold war era, China also appreciates the reality that if a sudden American withdrawal happens, it would bring about an increase in Japanese and Korean military capability that will destabilize the Northeast Asian region. China's concern about the ROK-U.S. alliance has also been diluted due to growing economic interdependence.

Although China recognizes the benefits of the continuing U.S. presence in the region, China fears that such an extension of permanent American influence in Northeast Asia will undermine China's national interests in long term. Thus, Beijing has an interest in weakening U.S. security ties in the region, free-riding on American power while it accumulates influence to be able to challenge the U.S. in the future, if not replacing the U.S. to be the pillar of regional security (Perry et al 2004).

4.2 The North Korean nuclear threat and China's responses

However, as the DPRK plays the nuclear card too frequently since the 1990s, China at times was reluctant to back the DPRK, but supporting and approving the UNSC resolutions especially when the crises escalates. Upset by China's action siding with the enemy, the U.S., North Korea displays its discontent through the lack of commitments in the Six-Party Talks (6PT). China has been pressured by the remaining members of the 6PT to be the main player who can put pressure on the DPRK and brings it to the table. However the withdrawals from the talks by the DPRK over time since the inception of 6PT clearly show signs of disoblige on North Korean parts. However when crises occurred on the Peninsula, China will back the North as part of the 1961 China-North Korea Treaty's obligation. If China deserted North Korea completely, China would lose the trust of North Korea and this would harm its international credibility as the bilateral treaty is still effective to some extent. It is interesting to note that if there is an attack from North Korea (with or without nuclear capability) on South Korea or the U.S., such attack will not warrant an assistant from China as it does not fall within the scope of the mutual assistance under the 1961 Treaty. But if North Korea is under attack (a pre-emptive strike) by the result of its rogue behavior, for example the developed nuclear weapon and the misused of it, China would be obliged to assist or fight for the DPRK (Shen 2006).

A significant obstacle for China is its limited influence over the North Korean regime, which is deeply paranoid and has undergone a gradual ideological estrangement and socio-economic divergence from China (Perry et al 2004). Beijing has little leverage to dissuade the DPRK from its course, and its leverage weakens the more it is used. There is also a dilemma that an effective coercive strategy like cutting off economic and energy supply might trigger a backlash from a desperate North.

4.3 Japan

The geographic proximity of the Korean peninsula to Japan has inevitably making the Korean Peninsula issues on top of Japanese national security concerns. In fact, the peninsula has been described as a dagger pointing at the heart of Japan in Northeast Asian relations metaphor. In an event of conflict on the peninsula or between the DPRK-U.S. standoff, it is believed that the military bases in Japan would become the missile targets by the North. North Korea's existing arsenal of medium range *No Dong* (노동)⁹ ballistic missiles which numbered in the hundreds can reach most parts of Japanese islands, within 1300 kilometers from the launch pad. The surprise launch of *Taepodong* intermediate-range missile over the home islands in 1998 further fuel public anxieties and strengthen claims by some Japanese elites to pursue military normalization to face the threat.

Japan's defense posture enables Japan to play a role in multilateral security cooperation (Cronin & Green 1994). Japanese leaders also realized and recognized they need to expand the defense capabilities if they want Japan to be a serious player vis-à-vis North Korea. However, according to Yoichiro Sato (2009), Japan is unlikely to use any stronger policy, such as the use of the Self Defense Force (SDF) to counter

⁹ It is spelled Ro Dong (로동) in the North.

North Korean actions. In November 1995, Japan's parliament passed a new National Defense Policy Outline revising that of 1976. After the U.S.'s "Bottom-Up Review" and Japan's "Higuchi Report", U.S. and Japan working level meetings were held under the initiative of Joseph Nye. These efforts bore fruit in the U.S.-Japan Joint Declaration on Security of 1996 and the Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation, signified Japan has taken its first explicit role in the security of the peninsula.

The new defense strategy shifts its focus from northern regions of Japan to central and western regions in terms of geography, and from an exclusively defense-oriented strategy to an omni-directional strategy. New Defense Build-up Plan was pursuing the achievement of autonomous defense strategy and intelligence capability through qualitative improvement (Choi 2004: 62). Japan has invested over 1 trillion *yen* in the missile system. According to the April 4, 2009 *Asahi Shimbun*, the Japanese government deployed nine *Aegis* destroyers to track the North's rocket, with seven of the destroyers equipped with interceptor missiles. This was a much higher level of preparedness than had been the case for the North's missile launches in 1998 and 2006. In 1998, when North Korea fired a *Taepodong-1* missile, Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) had one *Aegis* destroyer to track it. At Pyongyang's 2006 launch of a *Taepodong-2*, the MSDF deployed one destroyer and the U.S. sent two (Kang & Lee 2009).

The 1996 Taiwan Strait missile crisis has also prompted Japan to embrace a more robust security posture with the U.S. as a more powerful China in the making will project its modernized military power and try to assert influence in Northeast Asia. This signals China will be in clear competition sooner or later with another regional power which is Japan that does not possess 'normal' military capability. The Taiwan Strait missile crisis has led to the further strengthening of military ties between the U.S. and Japan, increasing the role Japan would play in defending Taiwan.

4.4 The North Korean nuclear threat and the ROK--U.S.--Japan security alliance

According to Schoff (2009), symbols have always been important to the U.S.-Japan alliance and to the concept of deterrence, whether the symbol is the nuclear umbrella, basing a U.S. aircraft carrier in Japan, or forward deploying a hundred thousand U.S. military personnel in East Asia. Since its establishment, the U.S.-Japan security treaty has had implications for peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. Article 6 of the treaty, for example, gave the United States the right to use bases in Japan.

The problem of the DPRK has emerged as the driving force of Japan's growing security consciousness and activism and as a principal issue in U.S.-Japan alliance relations. It is not the case before the 1990s as the U.S.-Japan security alliance serves regional security objectives rather than focusing on the Korean peninsula which is mainly looked after by the U.S.-ROK security alliance. Since the end of World War II (WWII), the U.S.-Japan security arrangements have formed one of the most significant pillars of Japan's security strategy. Having the U.S. to play a strategic buffer role so that Japan could avoid dealing directly with Korean security

issues, Tokyo remained somewhat ambivalent about what impact North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship was really having on Japan.

Japan was confident that U.S. security guarantee and decreasing supports from Japanese Koreans toward DPRK will not change Japan's policy toward the Korean Peninsula, until 1998 North Korean Taepodong missile passing over Japanese islands before landing in the Pacific Ocean. Following the 1998 missile launch, the ongoing debate over revising defense guidelines was intensified and it is deeply engraved in to Japan's intention to military 'normalization'. Japan had taken steps to prove their security concern by launching intelligence satellite in 2002, and accelerate its trilateral efforts with the U.S. and ROK over North Korean threat potential.

However, North Korea's cultivation of its nuclear option and brinkmanship tactics altered the U.S.-ROK dynamic and this trait can be seen during the Clinton and Bush administrations. This somewhat led to U.S. pressures on Japan for greater burden sharing and Japan begins to increase its security role in the region by expanding defense capability while the U.S. decreased its subsidy due to the competitive Japanese economy, in light of North Korea's nuclear endeavour in the early 1990s. On the other hand, South Korea incrementally adapted its own economy and defense policy from Japan's experience with the U.S. Though South Korea seems to be anxious about the course U.S.-Japan security policy seemed to be taking, Seoul and Tokyo began to behave in a similar manner as the U.S.' Northeast Asia allies.

The U.S.-Japan alliance is important to Korean Peninsula security, in addition to being essential in its own right. The American presence in Japan, and the use of Japanese ports and airfields in support of Korean contingencies, adds to the credibility of the U.S. commitment to the ROK and thus directly supports deterrence (Cossa 1996). Japan hosts a large contingent of U.S. forces (over 35,000), including the region's only marine expeditionary force and forward deployed U.S. aircraft carrier. Japan has also been flexible in accommodating America's use of its Japan-based military assets for operations around the region (Schoff 2009). In addition, Japan pays for three-quarters of the total cost of stationing U.S. Forces Japan (and over 50 percent of the total cost for host nations' contributions paid by 26 American allies around the world).¹⁰

Transition on the Korean Peninsula will have a direct impact on the U.S.-Japan alliance. In an imaginary scenario, if war broke out or the collapse in the North happened, the purpose of the ROK-U.S. alliance will be vanished after the war or when the absorption of the North by the South happens. The U.S. military forces will be drastically reduced if not withdrawn completely. Such outcome will force Japan to bear more cost as the only U.S. outpost for U.S. forces in East Asia, and under domestic political pressure and also the change of status quo for all powers in the region will compel Japan to pursue military buildup that will fundamentally change its alliance with the U.S.

China and Japan obviously have tremendous stakes and interests vested in the Korean Peninsula, and both recognized that the promise of dramatic change on the

¹⁰ For more details, see U.S. Department of Defense, 2004 Statistical Compendium on Allied Contributions to the Common Defense, http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/allied_contrib2004/allied2004.pdf

Peninsula could be either beneficiary or bring about negative changes in each other's geopolitical positions in the region (Perry et al 2004: 153).

Conclusion

Referring to the framework of strategic stability established for this study, Northeast Asian strategic stability in the case of Korean Peninsula security issue is an enduring situation, in which various strategic forces such as United States Forces Korea, ROK Army, United States Forces Japan, and Japan SDF are able to establish and sustain a strategic framework for basic relations between them through bilateral relations and multilateral security forum such as bilateral security treaties, TCOG and Six-Party Talks. The bilateral, trilateral and multilateral military and security arrangements among the ROK, the U.S., Japan and other regional actors are trying to achieve a balance of core interests among themselves. Japan's geostrategic and political magnitude is vital to Northeast Asian alliance front to deal with the North Korea problem, especially as a strategic base to provide the U.S. force to assist the ROK in case of a breakout of war, and as an important leverage against the North Korea through financial and light water program in the multilateral negotiation mechanism. Japanese-U.S. tension over abduction issue and also overcoming deep-seated historical ROK suspicions about its attempt to increase defense capability are yet to be resolved gradually but all players agree that putting the halt on North Korean nuclear program is the main priority. Japan, the U.S. and the ROK are yet to move forward in the discussion among themselves whether to resolve the hurdles in their bilateral relations or to put their differences behind them and prioritize the effort to deal with North Korean aggressive actions in order to achieve better regional strategic stability.

In order to achieve strategic stability, one of two developments must transpire on the Korean Peninsula. Either North Korea must be transformed or the U.S. and its allies South Korea and Japan must transform their policies toward DPRK. The latter option is seen as a more practical step than depending on the unpredictable North Korean regime. Domestic politics and presidential elections have played significant role in influencing the ROK-U.S. alliance and their relations. Depends on the condition and perspectives of the administrations and the public, the issues U.S. troops and bases in Korea has also become uncertain over their troop reduction and relocation of the bases. The transfer of wartime operation control has been delayed (until 2015 from the initial transfer date of 2012) again in light of Cheonan incident which occurred in March 2010. China's relationship with North Korea and Japan's national security condition and its geo-strategic location are important determinants to a successful ROK-U.S. security alliance against the DPRK. It is undeniable that presence of ROK-U.S. alliance is stabilizing rather than destabilizing the Peninsula.

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