An Enduring Partnership: 
South Korea and the United States

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Keywords: alliance, OPCON, George W. Bush, Park Geun-hye, Barack Obama

The United States has had an intense military alliance relationship with the Republic of Korea (ROK) for more than six decades. By occupying the southern half of the Korean Peninsula at the end of World War II, the U.S. military created the conditions for the establishment of South Korea as an independent country in 1948. The United States then rescued the new country from foreign invasion by the North in 1950. Since then, and despite the growing capabilities of the ROK’s own military, thousands of U.S. troops have remained in South Korea, along with tanks, warplanes, and other powerful weapons. While the numbers of U.S. troops in South Korea have shifted over the years, the general mutual defense commitment has remained solid. Meanwhile, South Korea, despite its precarious security environment and limited natural resources, unexpectedly became an international economic superstar and achieved a global presence through the hard work and skills of its people. The transformation of South Korea into a liberal democracy helped release these human resources. The ROK’s economic and political transition in turn made it a more valuable partner of the United States. Although security issues still dominate the U.S.-ROK alliance, their shared political values, robust economic exchanges, and deepening human ties have provided a firmer foundation for the alliance, which would likely persist even after Korean reunification.

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Reframing of the Alliance after the Cold War

During the Cold War, South Korean officials protested vigorously whenever it appeared that the United States or other Western governments were interested in diplomatically engaging the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). The two Korean states still technically remain in a state of war. The 1950–1953 Korean War ended with an armistice, not a peace treaty. Furthermore, South Korea is not even a signatory to the armistice agreement, which was signed by the governments of North Korea and China on one side, and the U.S.-led United Nations Command on the other. As part of their commitment to anticommunism, the South Korean government deployed over 50,000 ROK troops in South Vietnam to combat the communists there in partnership with the United States and its South Vietnamese allies. They also participated actively in U.S. efforts to contain the People’s Republic of China.

The external posture of South Korea in general, and toward North Korea in particular, began a new chapter in the 1980s. While retaining its previous goals of enhancing political legitimacy, military security, and economic development by maintaining close ties with the United States, South Korea greatly expanded its diplomatic horizons by launching its ambitious “Northern Diplomacy.” The approach aimed to reconcile the ROK’s traditional ties with the West with its new opportunities in the East. In particular, the new diplomatic strategy involved the pursuit of wide-ranging relations with Communist Bloc countries, eventually to include direct contacts and dialogue with North Korea. The Northern Policy was successful in expanding the ROK’s global ties in sports, trade, and diplomacy. By the beginning of 1990, the ROK had diplomatic relations with more than 130 countries. Meanwhile, South Korea emerged as the world’s fifteenth-largest economy in the late 1980s. By then, the economic reforms and the open-door policies of China and the Soviet Bloc countries led to considerable trade and other commercial ties between South Korea and the Communist countries, which persisted even after the Soviet Union and its European allies abandoned state socialism.

South Korean relations with the DPRK began to improve after the February 1998 inauguration of President Kim Dae-jung. His “Sunshine Policy” (officially known as “the Policy of Reconciliation and Cooperation toward North Korea”) toward the DPRK tried to improve relations with the North Korean government through negotiations and diplomatic, economic, and other inducements to coax the regime out of its self-destructive isolation and to reassure the DPRK leadership about its security. These enticements included encouraging other countries to engage with North Korea, providing increased humanitarian and economic assistance, postponing negotiations on the most difficult issues dividing the two countries, and helping reassure the North Korean regime about its security concerns in the hope that a more benign security environment would encourage the DPRK leadership to pursue political and economic reforms.

Roh Moo-hyun largely continued these engagement policies during his 2003–2008 presidency under the renamed “Peace and Prosperity Policy.” Coming into office at the time of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and President George W. Bush’s “Axis of Evil” speech, Roh believed that North Korea had developed nuclear weapons in response to U.S. threats and to induce Washington to engage in a direct dialogue with Pyongyang. At times, he feared that rash U.S. actions would precipitate a war on the peninsula, which would prove disastrous for South Korea no matter what its outcome. The Roh