THE KOREAN-AMERICAN ALLIANCE: ITS EVOLUTION, TRANSITION, AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Bae Ho Hahn *

I. Introduction

Among the many bilateral and multilateral security arrangements the United States had entered after 1945, few were as close and extensive as that between Korea and America. Formed at the end of the Korean War, in which the United States suffered some 34,000 battle deaths and spent more than 18 billion dollars, the alliance has played a decisive role in the survival and development of South Korea, and has contributed to stability and peace in East Asia.

The alliance developed some special characteristics unique among America’s other alliances in Asia which came from the shared experiences of a difficult history. The basis of the alliance was the cold war and joint military action to meet the challenge of Communist expansion. Korea became a test case in demonstrating the West’s will to punish unprovoked aggression and to defend the principle of self-determination. As such the Korean-American alliance acquired a symbolic significance in the East-West struggle that has endured to this day.

Since the signing of the U.S.-Korea Mutual Defense Treaty in 1953, the United States has maintained its military presence in Korea with land, air, and naval forces in and around Korea. The U.S. government cited various reasons for its military presence in Korea—to avoid “hegemony” by any major power in the Korean peninsula; to exert a “restraint” on South Korea’s unilateral military actions; to provide an “umbrella” for Korea’s continued economic growth;

* Dr. Bae Ho Hahn is Professor of the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Korea University, Seoul, Korea.
to give "tangible assurance" of American support for South Korea's peaceful initiative toward North Korea; and to serve as a "symbol of America's continuing interest in the overall stability" of East Asia. The Korean-American alliance has served all of these purposes either simultaneously or by meeting specific security needs of South Korea in different situations.

As an instrument of collective defense against external enemies (in this case, North Korea and, possibly, the combined forces of North Korea and Communist China), the Korean-American alliance has proved remarkably endurable and promises to continue along this track well into the future. Ostensibly very close for the most part, the relations between South Korea and the United States have been beset with some thorny problems which strained relations when the two partners, each pursuing its own national interests with different conceptions of the U.S. role in Korean security, made different and at times conflicting responses to issues that arose in the 1960s and 1970s.

From the outset of the formation of the alliance, the United States tended to view developments on the Korean peninsula within a global context whereas the Republic of Korea tended to view them mainly in terms of a North-South confrontation. The primary objective of the United States in entering the relationship with the Republic of Korea was to check the expansion of Soviet and Chinese power in East Asia, whereas South Korea's sole objective was to prevent another North Korean invasion. Korea represented only one segment of the United States global concerns, but the world situation was important to South Korea only in its relevance to Korea's own security.

In spite of these discrepancies in the perceptions of Korean security and the role of the United States in Korea's security, the two allies viewed Communist threats to Asian and Korean security as both obvious and intense when the United States pursued its containment policy toward international communism. A greater divergence of views between the two allies developed as the United States, under the rubric of the Nixon Doctrine, began to steer away from her previous engagements in Asia and to ask her Asian allies to assume a greater share of the burden of maintaining their security needs, cooperate with adversaries, and to moderate whatever differences divided the United States from these antagonists. From the vantage point of the United States, the meaning of the Doctrine was reasonably clear. But it was not clearly understood by South Korea, which felt that the changes wrought by these initiatives scarcely