

THE UNITED STATES-REPUBLIC OF KOREA ALLIANCE AND THE KOREAN CONUNDRUM

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Taking into account the disproportionate rapport between the two associated states, we can safely assume that during the Cold War period, the relationship between the two countries was characterized by an asymmetrical alliance. Respecting its status of superpower, the U.S. defended the status quo of its junior partner, by providing the necessary security tools, whereas the South Korean leadership had to make political concessions in order to maintain the stability of the region. Yet, the Americans did not actively pursue the democratic transformation of the Korea, and instead chose to support various authoritarian regimes. This fact could be explained by the uneven U.S. interest up until the mid-'70's, as the various Presidential Administrations chose to preserve the relatively peaceful situation of the Peninsula and to disregard the inexistent democratic principles and the human rights abuses. Nevertheless, the Vietnam War and the Iranian crisis represented a priority on the American agenda, so the Korean problem was somehow neglected.

Keywords: Cold War, The United States, Korean problem

INTRODUCTION

Due to its vital geographical position, the Korean Peninsula was deeply affected by the political and diplomatic stances of its powerful neighbours, as China and Japan, and later on, Soviet Union, tried to impose their political principles upon the inexperienced Hermit Kingdom. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the WWII, the interests of the newly emerging superpower, the United States, intertwined with the Korean affairs, as their competition with the Soviets and the subsequent Cold War bipolarity led to the irreparable division of the Peninsula. Therefore, after the proclamation of the Republic of Korea and the creation of its nemesis, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, a crucial alliance between the Americans and the South Koreans was forged. The partnership was consolidated by the similar anti-communist approach and the subsequent outbreak of the Korean War. Furthermore, immediately after the cessation of hostilities, the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty officially sealed the strategic arrangement.

However, the wavering international order, the alteration of the U.S. priorities, the South Korean democratic transformation and its increasing role on the global agenda, and ultimately the protracted North Korean threat led to tensions between the two partners. Due to the incongruities between the diplomatic alternatives, the alliance seemed to fall apart¹. The reunification conundrum and the divergent threat perceptions exposed the animosities between the two countries.

Despite the frictions between the two allies, the instability of the Peninsula was crucial for the maintenance of a favourable rapport between the countries. For that reason, the main assumption of the paper will highlight the triangular relationship between the two Korean states and United States: *the everlasting bellicose discourse of the almost too ambitious North Korean leadership, as well as the enhanced nuclear threat, pressured the two democratic partners and impelled them to come up with a homogeneous strategy regarding the security dilemma. Thus, the recent North Korean threat has strengthened the U.S.-ROK cooperation.* Although the divergence between the Progressive Presidency² and the Republican Administration threatened the alliance, the positive balance was re-established by the succeeding governments.

METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

The essay will concentrate upon the unification dilemma, by taking into account the significant impact of the immutable North Korean threat upon the alliance between the Americans and the South Koreans. Consequently, the second section will briefly scrutinize the partnership between the two democratic states, whereas the following chapters will examine the validity of the assumption. Hence, the analysis will bring attention to the recent events, but also to the everlasting cycle of nuclear tests, censure, sanctions and communist disobedience. Nonetheless, the fickle Chinese reaction will be also included in the reconciliation formula, as Beijing was always considered the ardent pillar behind the North Korean blabbering. Furthermore, in order to design a viable alternative to the Korean conundrum, various solutions will be investigated, mainly focusing upon the U.S.-ROK partnership and a homogenous answer, advertised by the domestic policy makers. Last and not least, pertinent conclusions will be presented in the final section, as I will try to advance a concluding report upon the cardinal relationship between the two democratic states.

¹ I mainly refer to the divergence between the “Hawk engagement” promoted by the Bush Administration and the Sunshine policy endorsed by the government led by Kim Dae-jung.

² Kim Dae-jung Administration (1998-2003) and his progressive successor Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008).

For a better understanding of the mechanisms which led to the enactment of the alliance, as well as the dynamics of the partnership, a review of the literature concerning this particular topic will be revealed in the subsequent section. Thus, the alliance formation and dynamics will be investigated, by employing the classic dichotomy between the realist scholars and the neoliberal approach. Hence, the well-known books of Hans Morgenthau, Stephen Walt, Kenneth Waltz and Robert Keohane will help us conceptualize the alliance between the two countries. Altogether, for the data collection, open and written sources will be employed for a relevant analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The dynamics of alliance formation was intensively approached by many political scientists, as it represented a key topic in the broad field of the international relations. For the realist scholars, the relationship between the states and the logic behind the crystallization of such strategic partnerships were simply explained by the balance of power system³, without taking into consideration the economic and informal agreements among the sovereign entities. Hence, the main purposes of the alliance were to mingle the military capabilities against a common enemy and to counterbalance the pre-eminence of a single state⁴. Furthermore, the national security remained the top priority of each domestic policy maker.

Nonetheless, the subsequent theoreticians extended this framework, as they tried to come up with alternative arguments. Instead of concentrating upon the aggregation of the military facilities, the domestic political situations, as well as the mutual economic cooperation, were taken into account. Thus, the alliances were defined as inert war communities, based on general collaboration and mutual confidence⁵. The institutionalist perspective brought attention to alliances' features as institutions, inasmuch as they were rather described as sets of rules, influencing the patterns of behaviour and shaping the activity of the associated entities⁶. Hence, the international cooperation was enhanced by these institutions, as their role overpassed even the interests of the states.

³ Hans MORGENTHAU, *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*, Alfred A. KNOPF, New York, 1948, p. 125.

⁴ Kenneth N. WALTZ, *Theory of international politics*, first edition, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1979, p.125.

⁵ Robert E. OSGOOD, *Alliances and American foreign policy*, The John Hopkins Press, 1968, p. 19.

⁶ Robert O. KEOHANE, "Neoliberal institutionalism: a perspective on world politics" in Robert O. KEOHANE (ed.) *International institutions and state power: essays in International Relations theory*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1989, p. 3.

In order to explain the peculiarity of the Middle East alliances, Stephen Walt came up with a structure describing the factors behind such strange associations. Therefore, the alliances were defined as “formal or informal relationship security cooperation between two or more sovereign states”, requiring “some level of commitment and an exchange of benefits”⁷. Analogous to the realist approach, the military capabilities remained the primary focus for elucidating the complex interactions between the countries. However, these partnerships were not solely concerned with counterbalancing the increasing power of a state, but they were rather established in response to a threat. Ergo, the author stressed two types, balancing and bandwagoning, depending whether the states allied against the preeminent threat or they chose to align with the menacing power⁸. Furthermore, Walt concluded that the ideological explanation and the impact of foreign aid and political penetration were not powerful incentives for the alliance formation⁹.

Last and not least, taking into consideration the fact that the case study will be based upon the interactions between a great power and a middle one, the current alliance literature review must also encompass the situation when there is a disproportion between the associated entities; thus, the pattern highlighted by James Morrow will be re-examined. Based upon the exchange of security and autonomy, the article pinpointed two types of alliances: the symmetrical ones, in which the parties engaged in a mutual defence pact and the asymmetrical ones, a client-patron type, in which one state provided the security and the other had to relinquish a part of its sovereignty and to make political concessions¹⁰.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

Before the WWII, the American interest in the Asia-Pacific region was purely economic, yet the Pearl Harbour incident and the subsequent war against Japan triggered a significant shift in the U.S. foreign policy. The Cold War bipolarity and the competition with the Soviets regarding the establishment of spheres of influence indeed enhanced their implication in the Korean affairs. The outburst of the Korean War, the imminent communist takeover and its inevitable consequences upon the freshly demilitarized Japan were further incentives for the American interference.

Due to a double misapprehension, the conflict quickly escalated, as on the one hand, the Soviets thought that the U.S. will remain passive to the communist annexation of the Peninsula and on the other hand, the Americans exaggerated the

⁷ Stephen WALT, *The origins of alliances*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1987, p. 1.

⁸ WALT, *The origins*, p. 5, 17.

⁹ James MORROW, “Alliances and asymmetry: an alternative to the capability aggregation model of alliances” in *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 35, no. 4, November 1991, p. 905.

proportions of the clash, as they assumed that the war was orchestrated by a communist conspiracy¹¹. Thus, we can characterize the alliance from the realist point of view, as the U.S. employed its military capabilities in order to counterbalance the communist insurgence, provoked by the opportunist leader and former guerrilla fighter Kim Il Sung. Ultimately, the joined Chinese, Soviet and North Korean troops were defeated by the security partnership between the large American armed forces and their junior ally, South Korea, as the 3 years dispute was brought to an end by an armistice. The cessation of hostilities also brought the official establishment of the strategic arrangement, though the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty, in October 1953. Furthermore, after a quarter of a century, the deterrence against North Korea led to the creation of the Combined Forces Command (CFC), located in Seoul and under the helm of a U.S. General and a Korean deputy commander.

Even if his framework was designed in order to decipher the complex Middle East relations, the book by Stephen Walt could also explain the dynamics of the U.S.-ROK alliance. Hence, bearing in mind the fact that the two states chose to collaborate due to the communist menace, the partnership could be justified though the balancing hypothesis. Furthermore, the ideological standpoint could also be included, as the anti-communist stance nurtured the joint effort of the two countries. After the cessation of the Korean War, it lessened the communicational bridge between the two allies.

Taking into account the disproportionate rapport between the two associated states, we can safely assume that during the Cold War period, the relationship between the two countries was characterized by an asymmetrical alliance. Respecting its status of superpower, the U.S. defended the status quo of its junior partner, by providing the necessary security tools, whereas the South Korean leadership had to make political concessions in order to maintain the stability of the region. Yet, the Americans did not actively pursue the democratic transformation of the Korea, and instead chose to support various authoritarian regimes. This fact could be explained by the uneven U.S. interest up until the mid-'70's¹², as the various Presidential Administrations chose to preserve the relatively peaceful situation of the Peninsula and to disregard the inexistent democratic principles and the human rights abuses. Nevertheless, the Vietnam War and the Iranian crisis represented a priority on the American agenda, so the Korean problem was somehow neglected.

After the occurrence of democratic transition, in 1987, the global status of South Korea started to improve. Therefore, the dynamics in the alliance suffered

¹¹ Henry KISSINGER, "The dilemma of containment: the Korean War" in *Diplomacy*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1994, p. 475.

¹² David ADESNIK, Sun Hyun KIM, "If at first you don't succeed: the puzzle of South Korea's democratic transition" in *CDDRL working papers*, Stanford, number 83, July 2008, p. 5.

crucial adjustments: it was impossible for the Koreans to reach a similar competence as their partners, but gradually the Asian state acquired the status of a middle power. Hence, the patron-client alliance metamorphosed into an institutionalized type of association. The military facilities were no longer the sole aim of the collaboration, as slowly the economic settlements replaced them. Beside the 123 Agreement regarding the civil nuclear facilities (enhancement of uranium fuel and recycle of spent plutonium rights)¹³, the 2007 free trade agreement (KORUS FTA) showed the tremendous affinity between the two allies. Yet, due to the protracted North Korean threat, the security of the Peninsula remained at the core of the alliance. Thus the military cooperation and coordination prevailed upon the other informal arrangements.

From the American perspective, the alliance between the two countries was always considered a significant pillar in their East Asian agenda. Despite the fact that the original purpose of the alliance was to counterattack the actions of the communist block at large, the responses of the two allies were not strictly confined to the maintenance of a secure environment inside the Peninsula. Even the Mutual Defense Treaty enlarged the area of action to the Pacific region, highlighting its future relevance. Thus, at the Peninsula level, the aim of the collaboration encompassed the achievement of a ROK-led reunification. On the other hand, at the regional level, they tried to prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon¹⁴. Acting in opposition to the U.S. global and transformational viewpoint, up until recently the South Koreans rather concentrated upon the domestic issues and approached the partnership from a Peninsula perspective¹⁵. Yet, the democratization and the successful economic model strengthened the position of the Koreans and enlarged their foreign policy spectrum.

Altogether, the U.S.-ROK collaboration remained one of the oldest in the Asia-Pacific region; yet, due to the internal and external pressures, it faced many ups and downs: from the initial patron-client relationship, to the disengagement of the '70s and from the frictions regarding the late democratization in the '80s to the rejuvenation of the alliance in the '90s. Thus, the initial asymmetrical alliance greatly transformed, from a partnership driven by the military cooperation into a 21st century strategic alliance, based on economic collaboration, solidarity and responsibility-sharing. The Korean conundrum remained a top priority on the

¹³ <http://csis.org/publication/us-and-south-korea-agree-extension-123-civil-nuclear-agreement>, consulted at 08th of May, 2013, 13:20; The 123 Agreement was signed in 1972 and revised two years later. Due to its impending expiration (March 2014), the current presidents agreed to extend it for another 2 years.

¹⁴ Firstly, they had to deal with the incredible economic development of Japan and nowadays, they are confronting with the so-called "rise of China".

¹⁵ Kang CHOI, "The ROK-U.S. alliance: past, present, future" in *Issues and insights*, Honolulu, vol. 13, no. 1, January 2013, p. 41.

agenda of the two countries, as the ultimate purpose was a ROK-led reunification. However, the process was encumbered by the stubbornness of the North Korean leadership, as the third leg of this triadic nexus complicated the Korean affairs. What were the effects of the communist aggressive rhetoric?

THE KOREAN DILEMMA AND THE STRATEGIC ALLIANCE

The alliance between the South Koreans and the Americans overpassed long ago the boundaries of an uncomplicated military cooperation. The economic interests, as well the regional competition were powerful incentives for maintaining the partnership. Yet, the ambitious discourse of the North Korean leadership deeply affected the foreign agenda of the two countries. The relative imbalance between the two allies translated into divergent procedures, as the two governments pursued a common goal, yet ultimately chose disparate paths. The government turnovers did not shaped only the national political spectrum, but also guided the foreign policy agenda. This exaggerated inclination towards the domestic elements and the post-Cold War global configuration nurtured further discrepancies¹⁶. Hence, the analogous solution promoted during the 1990s was replaced by disparate methods: the flexible attitude concerning the North Korean problem, encouraged by the Clinton Administration and the government supervised by Kim Dae-jung, was switched with a hardliner standpoint, endorsed by president Bush.

After a tumultuous period, characterized by the animosities between the Bush Administration and the two Korean Progressive Governments, the Lee Myung-bak's investiture as President completely reversed the alliance dynamics. Once again, a compatible solution was promoted, but this time, it was antithetical to the 1990s answer ("soft-landing" of President Clinton and the Korean "Sunshine policy"). Instead of a soft-line diplomatic stance, the two heads of state chose to advocate a harsher policy, hostile conditions for the communist regime and with almost no option of negotiation¹⁷. As a response, the North Korean discourse became even more pugnacious, while the communists continued the development of the nuclear facilities.

The recent North Korean threat proved the high level of affinity between the two allies, as they unanimously rejected the bellicose speech. The newly elected president, Park Geun-hye, criticized the hard-line policies of her predecessor, yet, her "Trust politik" plans were neutralized by the in compliant neighbour. She intended to come up with a compromising alternative to the conciliatory and

¹⁶ CHOI, "The ROK-U.S.", p. 43.

¹⁷ Young Chul CHO, "Collective identity formation on the Korean Peninsula: United States' different North Korea policies, Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy, and the United States-South Korea-North Korea relations" in *International relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 10, September 2010, p. 113.

permissive speech of the progressive head of states and the inflexible policy promoted by her Conservative predecessor; but, Kim Jong Un's provocative actions counterbalanced the effects of the innovative policy. Thus, the only viable alternative was to preserve the alliance with the Americans and to share the communist burden.

Altogether, the North Korean menace kept alive a troublesome alliance. In spite of the sometimes divergent directions of the two governments, the nuclear danger stabilized the wavering partnership. The recent developments confirmed that the two allies managed to overpass the difficulties and succeeded in their attempt to come up with a homogeneous strategy. Meanwhile, the international community, namely the UN Security Council, acting in the name of the two partners, tried to attenuate the conflict, by sanctioning the last nuclear tests. Yet, this solution bore no concrete results. What is the answer for this everlasting problem? The last section will inquire upon the past alternatives and will try to come up with a viable explanation for the Korean conundrum.

THE PROSPECTS OF UNIFICATION

The unification issue occupied a crucial place on the agenda of the three states, yet the first precise steps were made only at the beginning of the 1990s. Taking into account the death of the iconic leader, Kim Il Sung, and the dynastic succession, the Americans attempted to facilitate the process through bilateral talks with the communists. Since the signing of the U.S.-North Korea Agreed Framework, the subsequent Administrations, both in South Korea and the United States tried to sketch a feasible procedure concerning an accessible connection between the two Koreas. Hence, two alternatives could be pinpointed: the early solution, which sought to obtain the reconciliation through the opening of the North Korean regime and the economic concessions, and the harsher one, advertised after the initiation of the war on terror, which almost did not allow negotiations.

Despite the initial flexible policy, promoted by both allies, the North Korean actions and its big-mouthed leadership hindered the development of fruitful negotiations. Furthermore, the revision of the strategy inhibited any positive results. Taking advantage of the economic benefits, the Korean leader continued the bellicose rhetoric, as he managed to achieve significant material advantages in exchange for relative periods of stability. Thus, the communist elite distinguished itself through the unending cycle of tests, censure, sanctions and disobedience¹⁸.

¹⁸ Aidan FOSTER, "South Korea-North Korea relations: curtains for Kaesong", in *Comparative Connections*, Pacific Forum CIS, Honolulu, no. 34, May 2013, p. 75.

The futile efforts of the two democratic states bore no concrete result, as ultimately, North Korea had no intention of ROK-led unification whatsoever.

The Bush Administration completely rejected the economic compensation solution and demanded a complete denuclearization before commencing any negotiation with the communists. His solution, highly contradictory to the Korean alternative, aggravated the bilateral relations between the U.S. and North Korea and impelled the Supreme Leader to adopt an even more contentious discourse and to take concrete wartime measures.

So, which solution was better implemented? Up until nowadays, neither of the two alternatives proved suitable for the Korean case. The economic incentives were used by the North Korean leadership as a manipulating tool, whereas the astringent diplomatic stance further provoked the communist elite. Moreover, the unification dispute did not involve only the three countries, but it was also influenced by the other regional powers. Beside the United States, China was the other major actor engrossed in the process. Hence, many political analysts also bore in mind the Chinese actions and the China-U.S. relationship when they tried to estimate the future of the Korean Peninsula.

Beijing, the traditional ally of the North Korean leadership might have had reasons for opposing the unification of the Peninsula: the ideological embarrassment provoked by the collapse of a neighbouring communist regime, the usefulness of a malleable regime and the fear of a powerful U.S.-Korea alliance¹⁹. But, since 1990s, the dynamics of the North Korean- Chinese partnership diversified, as Beijing started to foster positive relations with Seoul, and to discard their junior communist ally. The economic interests prevailed upon the ideological proximity: the best illustration of this shift is given by the tacit approval of the U.S. and Korean plans and the non-interference regarding the UN sanctions. Traditionally, up until the recent UN resolutions, China tried to obstruct the United States actions in various corners of the world²⁰. Yet, together with their rebellious partner, Russia, the Chinese diplomats condemned the North Korean elite, the recent nuclear tests and the bellicose discourse.

Since they already obtained the Chinese green light, the road toward unification seemed easier than ever. Yet, no productive solutions were proposed. The triangular relationship U.S.-South Korea-North Korea is still facing the ceaseless cycle of quarrelsome monologue, defiance, sanctions and economic incentives. Furthermore, the huge discrepancies between the two countries slow down the reconciliation process.

The Nuclear threat and the almost too ambitious leadership from the North may not be the only roadblocks in the discussions regarding the unification. The

¹⁹ William OVERHOLT, *Asia, America and the transformation of geopolitics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 86.

²⁰ The best example is the negative vote concerning the intervention in Syria.

divergent paths taken by the two countries could greatly affect the future development of a unique Korean state, as the intensive indoctrination and propaganda promoted by the Kim family could make almost impossible a homogenization of the social norms. Despite the common Confucianism inheritance, the mentalities cultivated by the North dictators are totally incongruous with the values shaped by the democratic exposure in the South. A simple comparison between the immediately post war situation and the present one will reveal the huge gap between the two states.

FINAL REMARKS

After the Cold War dispute came to an end, the global order was once again reshuffled, as the states, including the former communist ones, had to acknowledge the American domination and the pre-eminence of the democratic option over the Soviet pattern yet, the consequences of this geopolitical shift were rather uneven: surprisingly, the situation of the Korean Peninsula remained unsolvable, as regardless of the numerous attempts of reconciliation, the post WWII disjuncture prevailed. Incontestably, the U.S. interference profoundly shaped this peculiar status quo.

The current paper tried to investigate the complex relationship between the three countries and its effects at the level of the Peninsula, but especially regionally and globally. Hence, the main assumption pinpointed the complex dynamics within the triangular relationship U.S.-South Korea-North Korea. *The everlasting bellicose discourse of the almost too ambitious North Korean leadership, as well as the enhanced nuclear threat, pressured the two democratic partners and impelled them to come up with a homogeneous strategy regarding the security dilemma. Thus, the recent North Korean threat has strengthened the U.S.-ROK cooperation.*

The domestic policy makers controlled the dialogue with the problematic communist regime; hence the government turnovers affected the cohesion of the U.S.- South Korea strategy. From a homogeneous design during the 1990s, the strategy took a 180 degree turn during the 2000s. For that reason, the flexible policy toward North Korea based on cooperation, mutual trust and economic openness, advocated by Clinton and Kim Dae-jung shifted toward a hard-liner stance, based on unconditional complete denuclearization of North Korea and no economic concessions. The illustrious discord between the “hawk engagement” and the “Sunshine policy” put in jeopardy the alliance, as once again, the Anti-American tenets resurfaced among the Korean citizens.

However, the North Korean leadership “saved” the alliance, as the persistent quarrelsome monologue motivated the two partners to maintain a positive balance.

Furthermore, the 2008 inauguration of the Conservative government in South Korea facilitated the peaceful settlement of the intra-alliance disputes. The recent belligerent actions enhanced the liaison between the two allies, as both states unanimously condemned the communist nuclear development. Therefore, in spite of its distinctive policy, the current president, Park Geun-hye, had to forsake her “Trust politik” and to realign with the alternatives proposed by Washington.

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