

Facing the Crucible: Australia, the ROK, and Cooperation in Asia*

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Current developments in Northeast Asia underscore the importance of recent efforts by Australia and South Korea to develop independent security ties. Understanding the rationales and selected benchmarks in Australian-ROK politico-security relations is important to reaching a meaningful assessment of how they could

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affect regional and international security. The “common wisdom” that the two countries’ distance from each other, and that their disparate historical and cultural backgrounds complicate the development of bilateral politico-security ties is contested here. A major challenge that both these “middle powers” will face will be to reconcile their alliances with the United States with their growing economic and political relations with China, particularly in the context of responding to future strategic contingencies on the Korean peninsula.

Key Words: Middle Power Diplomacy, Geopolitics, Free Trade Negotiations, Regionalization-Globalization Nexus, Alliance “Spoke Behavior”

I. Introduction

As Australia and the Republic of Korea (hereafter the “ROK” or “South Korea”) observe their fiftieth anniversary of full diplomatic relations, their common economic, political, and strategic interests reflect a history of success in such relations. However, this proud legacy is in danger of being supplanted by ongoing developments and crises in Northeast Asia. If these developments spiral out of control, Australia’s economic prosperity could be affected while South Korea’s very security could come into question. The viability of the Australia-ROK bilateral relationship rests on factors which may be difficult or impossible for policy-makers in either Canberra or Seoul to control. North Korea’s leadership transition, how well the People’s Republic of China (hereafter cited as “China” or the “PRC”) and the United States (or the “U.S.”) are able to coordinate their currently highly divergent postures toward the Korean peninsula, and the degree to which key regional actors can move beyond the worsening Korean crisis to build a stable regional security order are examples. Australia-ROK ties and the credibility of the “middle power diplomacy” that both states pursue in the region would be challenged.

The articles that follow this introductory essay address these problems. They also offer insights into an array of economic, politico-diplomatic and security issues related to order-building, trade, national identity, and other important concerns. They collectively challenge the common wisdom that this bilateral relationship is “not living up to its full potential” or that Australia and the ROK have conducted an “economically ‘hot’ but politically ‘cool’ engagement” (Cook, 2008: 1; Ungerer and Smith, 2010: 3). During President Lee Myung-bak’s visit to Australia in March 2009, for example, the two countries signed a Joint Statement on Enhanced Global and Security Cooperation designating forms of security collaboration in which Australia and South Korea could expand relations. Counter-terrorism, disaster relief, peacekeeping, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) non-proliferation, intelligence-sharing, and transnational crime were all stipulated within an “Action Plan” (initially accompanying the Joint Statement in March 2009 but revised and expanded in December 2009) (DFAT, 2009). The Plan provides for deliberations at the highest levels of policy-making, including annual meetings between foreign ministers, more frequent meetings between heads of state, and regular politico-military consultations.

Coming to terms with the ROK’s strategic significance to its own security and economy is nothing new for Australia. Skepticism has intermittently surfaced in both Australia and South Korea at intervals during the postwar era over the two countries’ strategic relevance to the other (Selth, 1985: 2, 14; Dupont, 1992: 36). During the early stages of the Korean War, Australian External Affairs Minister Percy Spender had to overcome his predecessors’ reluctance to commit Australian troops to any such contingency due to concerns about a shortage of the military resources needed to quell a burgeoning communist insurgency movement in Malaya. He did so by arguing that gaining a security alliance with the United States was a paramount Australian national interest, and that Washington would be reluctant to enter into such an arrangement if Australian military forces were not committed to the defense of South Korea. During the late 1960s, South Korean President Park Chung-hee had to insist to internal opposition

that stronger security relations with U.S. regional allies such as Australia would at least partially compensate for the perceived U.S. strategic retrenchment from Asia symbolized by the Nixon Doctrine.

Stronger South Korea ties were not totally accepted by subsequent Australian governments. Only a few years later, Gough Whitlam moved to normalize Australian relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter cited as the DPRK or "North Korea"). Prime Minister Bob Hawke strongly implied during the early 1980s that Australia's security interests were "not directly engaged" on the Korean peninsula (Selth, 1985: 2, 14). South Korean efforts to infuse greater Australian enthusiasm for the coordination of security policies through the Asia-Pacific Council or through a proposed Pacific and Asia Treaty Organization (PATO) were patently unsuccessful. Even Australian commitments to the United Nations machinery established after the 1953 Korean War armistices, were arguably low-key and somewhat ambiguous (Dupont, 1992: 36). Australian forces were withdrawn from South Korea in 1955. The Australian Embassy's defense attaché posted in Seoul (after Australia-ROK relations were normalized in 1961) was only a lower-ranking (colonel-grade) advisor to the United Nations Liaison and United Nations Advisory Groups, to the Senior Member of the United Nations Military Advisory Groups, and to the Senior Member of the United Nations Military Armistice Commission — an unrealistic workload for such a junior official. Australia also clashed with the Park government and its immediate successors over human rights issues (including the arrest of Kim Dae-jung and his subsequent death sentence announced in 1981) and over trade issues. An initial survey of Australia-ROK bilateral relations might lead one to conclude that physical distance and geopolitical indifference from each other, combined with little cultural awareness of each others' history and societies, has made these two U.S. security partners unlikely strategic collaborators.

Drawing such a conclusion, however, would be incorrect. Despite the disparities stipulated above, the two U.S. allies have shared an appreciation of the benefits derived from their bilateral relationship. These benefits include the retention of the world's most powerful

state as a key security actor in the Asia-Pacific region. They also entail the development and perpetuation of globally substantial national economies under the protection of U.S. strategic guarantees and power. According to the *CIA World Factbook 2010*, Australia currently fields the world's fourteenth largest economy while South Korea ranks sixteenth (*CIA World Factbook 2010*). Australia has played a significant role in supporting South Korea's postwar economic recovery. During the 1950s and 1960s it extended substantial assistance to the ROK to help recovery from disastrous floods and serious droughts. It was instrumental in facilitating South Korean participation in the Colombo Plan and in regional trading initiatives (Edwards, 1983). As then Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer recalled during an address to the Korea Press Foundation in November 2005, Australia deployed 18,000 troops to the peninsula during the Korean War.¹ It was the only country to serve on all three postwar UN Commissions in Korea. It was the largest out-of-country donor to the Korean Economic Development Organization (KEDO). It developed substantial commercial ties with the ROK as part of its cultivation of trading relations with Northeast Asia's three great economies (China, Japan, and South Korea) (Downer, 2005). It has moved in tandem with the ROK to support U.S. extended deterrence strategy through the regular convening of "pol-mil" and "mil-mil" bilateral consultations and through the conduct of joint military exercises such as the biennial "Rim of the Pacific" (RIMPAC) naval maneuvers. It has also been a valued South Korean partner in strongly supporting nuclear non-proliferation and in engaging in peace-building operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor and other troubled locales. Overall, the positive legacy of Australian-South Korean collaboration outweighs the tensions that have occasionally undermined it.

We argue here that Australia's and South Korea's mutual geopolitical interests are actually intensifying, a half century beyond their

1. The classic study on Australia's involvement in the Korean War remains Robert O'Neill's two volumes commissioned by the Australian War Memorial. See O'Neill (1981, 1985).

normalization of diplomatic relations. Two components of that intensification will be assessed below. First, the common threats that they both face have become both more regionalized and more globalized since 1961. Australia was then preoccupied with Southeast Asia and the ROK was confronting a “localized” North Korean rival, almost totally dependent on Soviet and Chinese military assistance. Since then, as one analyst presciently observed over twenty years ago, middle-ranking powers such as Australia and the ROK have had to find new and multiple ways to collaborate in a world which is increasingly diffuse (Richard Higgott, cited in Dupont, 1992: 25). Yet despite the increased flow of material resources and politico-diplomatic influence from a wider variety of actors regionally and internationally, the challenge of unifying the Korean peninsula remains as intractable now as it did during the Cold War. The stakes for Australia are no less great now than when it committed to the defense of the ROK in 1950. South Korea is Australia’s fourth largest trading partner. A new Korean War would trigger and sharply test the credibility and sustainability of Canberra’s existing alliance and international security commitments. It would very possibly generate Australia’s “strategic nightmare”: becoming compelled to “make a choice” between its traditional great and powerful American friend and its increasingly primary Chinese trading partner. This article’s concluding section advances two policy propositions for meeting these challenges.

II. The Geopolitics of Australia-ROK Relations: Greater Regionalization and More Globalization

“Geopolitics” — the study of how geography shapes relations between various wielders of power — appears to be a particularly appropriate framework for examining the contemporary nature of Australia-ROK security relations (this definition is extracted from O’Sullivan, 1986: 2, 5). Distance between these two states has been eroded by interdependent trade relations, by the advanced technologies of information and commerce that now underpin globalization,

and by more and more actors projecting hard and soft power to increasingly distant locations. This trend represents a dichotomy. “National sovereignty” is increasingly important in a South Korean and Australian context. Yet Seoul’s major rival in world politics — North Korea — is intensifying its claims for control of the entire Korean peninsula. It is determined to eradicate the American alliance system in Northeast Asia that it believes is responsible for denying Pyongyang’s leaders their rightful historical destiny of controlling all of Korea. Australia, as a highly modern, if geographically distant, economic partner of the ROK and as a strategic associate of the United States, is totally entwined with the outcome of this drama. This is true notwithstanding Canberra’s intermittent efforts to reach out to the DPRK through the normalizing of diplomatic relations and by sponsoring intermittent training programs for North Korean specialists in agriculture and economics.²

Australia-ROK relations have involved the two countries identifying and shaping a coherent set of strategies. This has been largely achieved in the economic arena as evidenced by the advanced stage of Australia-ROK free trade negotiations and other financial relationships covered by subsequent articles in this special issue. South Korea’s role in hosting the G20 summit, convened in Seoul during November 2010, was a symbolic reminder to Australia that while it could project influence as a self-appointed conduit for Sino-American

2. It is noted that neither the diplomatic or partnership training components have been very successful. Following Australia’s failure to support a “pro-North Korean” resolution geared to removing U.S. forces from the Korean peninsula in October 1975, North Korean diplomats posted in Canberra were summarily evacuated by their government and left Australia without explanation. A week later Australian diplomats were expelled from the DPRK on the pretext of their “improper behavior.” See Edwards (1983: 24). The Australian National University (ANU) has intermittently attempted to recruit North Korean students for enrolment in its various programs but has been constrained by the requirement imposed by the DPRK government that it approves all nominees for study in Australia. Those nominated to date have failed to meet the minimal language or related academic requirements to gain entry into ANU programs. See Park and Jung (2007: 87).

relations, it could not afford to lose sight of the opportunities posed by strengthening its ties with Asia's other major economies, including the ROK (*The Australian*, November 27, 2010).

The global aspect of Australia-ROK ties, however, goes well beyond economics. Over the past decade both countries have collaborated informally (frequently) and formally (increasingly) with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and with various "coalitions of the willing" formed to deal with selected international security issues and operations. Both countries' forces have been involved in recent "peace building" ventures in Iraq, Afghanistan and other military operations led by the United States and involving a significant number of European countries. In November 2010, NATO adopted a new "strategic concept" at a summit that was attended by representatives from both South Korea and Australia. This new strategy pledged that "[t]he Alliance will engage actively to enhance international security; through partnership with relevant countries and other international organisations" (NATO, 2010). Along with Japan and New Zealand, Australia and South Korea are formally designated "Pacific Contact Countries" that "share similar strategic concerns and key Alliance values" with de jure NATO member-states (Austin, 2010). Western strategic analysts often compare this arrangement with Japan as "NATO's 16th member" facing the Soviet threat during the 1980s. If war had erupted in Northeast Asia at that time, and Japan was to come under siege, it was highly probable that NATO would have come to its defense. It is less certain that NATO would extend the same assurances to South Korea in today's more complex international security environment. However, the growing "thickness" of inter-alliance networks and collaboration between NATO and the United States' bilateral allies in the Asia-Pacific is a sign of a larger Eurasian power balancing dynamic, involving the U.S. and both its Asian and European security partners vying with a rising China for geopolitical advantage (*Ibid.*).

The "regionalization-globalization nexus" in Australian-South Korean security relations is critical with respect to the threats inherent in North Korean power projection capabilities and with respect to the

challenges of escalation control inherent in U.S. and allied responses to such threats. The “common wisdom” held by strategic planners in Washington and in allied capitals is that U.S. and South Korean conventional forces would inevitably prevail over their North Korean counterparts. North Korea has attempted to compensate for this “asymmetry” by relying on the development of its own nuclear deterrent and by holding the city of Seoul hostage to massive North Korean artillery batteries deployed just over thirty kilometers north of the South Korean capital. The key to the DPRK credibly implementing its deterrence strategy is its potential to configure nuclear warheads on sophisticated ballistic missile delivery systems. This objective has yet to be reached. The Federation of American Scientists estimates that the North Korean Taepodong-I two-stage long-range ballistic missile, capable of delivering a one-ton payload approximately 2,500 kilometers, has been test-flown only once (on August 31, 1998) as a space vehicle and experienced failure in placing a satellite into orbit. The Taepodong-II, tested in July 2006, exploded after only forty seconds in flight. If this missile were to be successfully developed, it could theoretically deliver a payload up to 6,000 kilometers, putting the west coast of the United States, Hawaii, Australia, and parts of Eastern Europe within striking range (FAS, 2009; *Associated Press*, March 26, 2009). To date, it is unlikely that Australian security officials are kept awake at night worrying about imminent Taepodong attacks but the strategic aspirations of Pyongyang’s leaders to deploy a truly global nuclear strike force remain a potential source of concern.

A more immediate worry is possible North Korean involvement in the regionalization and globalization of nuclear proliferation. Independent analysts are divided over the extent to which North Korea may be extending some form of nuclear assistance to Myanmar. Recently leaked U.S. diplomatic cables indicate that, while American officials remain vigilant to a prospect of such assistance taking place, no concrete evidence has yet to surface verifying its existence (*The Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2010).³ There is little doubt, however,

3. Lintner (2010) asserts that U.S. perceptions and policies over the Myanmar

that the North Koreans have long engaged in close collaboration with Iran on nuclear materials production and missile technology, although the precise nature of that interaction still remains uncertain (Council on Foreign Relations, 2010). Recent disclosures about the existence of one or more uranium enrichment facilities in North Korea only compound Western and U.S. Asian allied apprehensions about Pyongyang as a destabilizing force to the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Historically a postwar leader in advancing global nuclear disarmament, Australia has no interest in witnessing either the development of a nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan would all reconsider their own nuclear options if North Korea's nuclear force were to weaken the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence postures in that region) or in accommodating an end to the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

Perhaps the most serious global ramification of an ongoing and unresolved Korean crisis for the ROK and Australia is the effect it would have on international perceptions of long-term U.S. power and influence. Washington's inability to find accord with China, Russia and (eventually) the DPRK itself leaves Northeast Asia — a major catalyst for world economic growth — an unresolved and highly volatile security dilemma. U.S. and allied preferences for the expansion of open markets, and for advances in democratization and community-building in the region, are in danger of being supplanted by protracted regional anarchy with no real compromise to, or solutions for, the North Korean quagmire. Without a substantial reversal of current trends, it will be harder for the U.S. and its allies on the one hand, and for China on the other (that country still maintains a half century old bilateral security treaty with the DPRK), to move beyond power balancing and other forms of geopolitics that realists in international relations argue constitute "the tragedy of great power politics" and the inevitability of war (Mearsheimer, 2001). The middle-power diplomacy that has been cultivated by recent governments in both Australia and South Korea, and that has emphasized development

nuclear issue are mixed and ambiguous.

and human security politics, free trade, regional community-building, and good global governance would be rendered irrelevant by such an outcome.⁴

III. Honing the “Spokes”: Australia-ROK Security Cooperation and the Sino-American Dyad

Direct bilateral security ties between various U.S. regional allies in the Asia-Pacific have intensified during the past five years as they have realized Washington will no longer be able or willing to sustain the hierarchical and exclusivist system of bilateral security arrangements that existed during the Cold War. This does not mean that Australia, South Korea, or other U.S. security partners no longer support a strong U.S. strategic presence. It does signify that they have concluded that the best means to assure a continued U.S. strategic presence in Asia is to increase their own contributions to regional security by cooperating amongst themselves. This is particularly the case as they confront the realities of a rising China and a North Korea that refuses to conform to standard international norms of diplomatic and strategic behavior. Closer collaboration is also mandated by growing uncertainties in Southeast Asia’s political landscape, with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) appearing to be less successful in steering its member-states through a morass of domestic political crises and challenges to their territorial integrity.

The 2009 Australia-ROK Joint Statement is a reflection of such intensified collaboration. The U.S. extended deterrence guarantees that have always been embodied in both Australia’s and South Korea’s

4. For commentary on the current South Korean government’s version of middle-power diplomacy, most recently packaged as “Global Korea,” see Jeong (2010); Ungerer and Smith (2010: 5-6). The current Australian Labor government’s major diplomatic initiative has been the “Asia Pacific Community” or APC proposal advanced by then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2008 and later linked by him in his new role as Australia’s foreign minister with the recent expansion of the East Asia Summit. See Rudd (2010).

alliance relations with the United States are still intact. Indeed, they have recently been upgraded in South Korea as part of the U.S.-ROK Security Policy Initiative in response to North Korea's WMD threat (Jung, 2010). Australia has also benefited from strengthening U.S. deterrence guarantees as a result of its willingness to host joint installations with the Americans on Australian soil that have been (and remain) integral to U.S. strategic intelligence and operational requirements (Lyon, 2008). U.S. financial and military resources, however, are coming under greater strain. Washington will reduce its force commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan as it moves, in the words of U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, to "establish a more geographically distributed, operationally resilient and politically sustainable" defense posture in Asia and internationally. Earmarking "partner militaries which are more professional and capable of contributing to international efforts to deal with the most vexing challenges that the United States and Asian partners face," Gates strongly signaled that the United States will rely increasingly on genuine collective defense efforts and capabilities (Banusiewicz, 2010). In this context, stronger bilateral intra-alliances between U.S. regional security partners or "spokes" in the U.S. hub and spokes alliance system is welcomed — even expected — by American policy planners and anticipated as a precondition for continued U.S. strategic support.

Within the above framework, Australia-ROK security cooperation incorporates several dimensions. These include selected Australian maritime operations designed to facilitate continued access to critical sea lanes of communication leading from Northeast Asia's critical industrial infrastructure into the broader maritime areas of the Western Pacific. They also entail increased joint strategic planning with Japan and the United States for future contingencies where U.S. forces may be deployed to defend the Korean peninsula or to safeguard U.S. and allied access to the Pacific Ocean's "island chains" in the event of Sino-American hostilities. Limited "quadrilateral coordination" between Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the United States is occurring. All four countries participate in the Asia-Pacific Regional Operational Experts Group of the Proliferation Security Initiative to

plan the monitoring and interdiction of WMD contraband on the high seas (Ungerer and Smith, 2010). Australia and South Korea participate in the RIMPAC biennial large-scale multinational power projection/sea control exercise.⁵ Japan and Australia have long been associated with U.S. research and development in theater missile defense capabilities. South Korea is developing its own missile defense system, but it is engaged in discussions with U.S. officials to purchase the Aegis ballistic missile defense system for deployment on its destroyers (GlobalSecurity.org, 2010).

The “China factor” looms as the most difficult policy issue confronting Australian-South Korean efforts to develop closer bilateral security relations. Both the Australian and South Korean economies are increasingly dependent on trade relations with the PRC. China-South Korea trade reached US\$ 141 billion in 2009, one-fifth of the ROK’s total trade volume (Snyder and Byun, 2010). South Korea has avoided situations with China where bilateral trade disputes have “spilled over” into politico-security relations (such as China threatening to block rare earth mineral exports in retaliation for Japanese interdiction of Chinese fisherman in the Senkaku/Diaotai islands area). South Korea’s intensification of U.S. alliance ties over the past year could test this legacy of restraint (Snyder and Byun, 2010; Kim, 2010). China is now Australia’s top trading partner with that bilateral trading relationship moving toward A\$ 100 billion in 2010 (Saminather and Couch, 2010). China is evidently not above exploiting this relationship to serve its national security interests, as evidenced by diplomatic leaks indicating that Beijing pressured Australia to soften its military posture after the latter’s release of its 2009 Defence White Paper which warned that Chinese military modernization could become a “source of concern” for the region (Dorling and Baker, 2010). Both Australia and South Korea will confront increasingly hard choices over how to adjust their economic relations with Beijing rela-

5. Both Australia and South Korea regularly deploy diesel submarines for this exercise which, according to the *Navy Times*, “inject into the exercise ‘the number one threat everybody has to deal with’” (Fuentes, 2010).

tive to their alliance ties to the United States.

This problem is particularly acute in regard to China's tacit but consistent support for North Korea in the aftermath of the latter's attacks against South Korean military units (the *Cheonan* attack in March 2010 and combined military/civilian targets on South Korean territory — Yeonpyeongdo — in November 2010). Australia supported South Korea and called upon the North to restrain from conducting further such actions (Johnson, 2010). This was an entirely predictable response, as were Canberra's close consultation with the United States and Japan. The acid test of Australian steadfastness in supporting the ROK, however, has yet to materialize. If North Korea were to follow through with its threats to retaliate against future South Korean and/or U.S.-South Korean military exercises in the Yellow Sea, and drew Northeast Asia into renewed conflict, Australia would face a stark choice: either support South Korea and the United States in any such conflict (such support would risk relinquishment of its China trade and much of the current basis for its own prosperity, the China market for its commodities), or remain neutral and jeopardize not only its bilateral relations with the ROK but its alliance relations with the United States. Conventional wisdom predicates that the current Australian Labor government would side with its traditional American ally, and fall into a role of defending the "San Francisco System" of U.S. bilateral alliances. To do so, however, would set back any multilateral regional security approach to adjudicating or modifying regional conflicts for years if not decades. This may, however, matter less than somehow avoiding the scenario of direct Sino-American military confrontation as a consequence of a new and escalating conflict on the Korean peninsula.

IV. Conclusion

Some of the articles following this one, in this special issue of the *Korean Observer*, postulate far more optimistic analysis about the future of regional conflict avoidance and community-building. Given

that both authors of this article are “realists” this may be understandable. We are not, however, completely pessimistic about the future of regional stability and international security as it relates to either the Korean peninsula or to the continued relevance of “spoke behavior” within the framework of U.S. alliance relations in the Asia-Pacific.

We endorse two approaches for both Australia and South Korea to coordinate and pursue. The first has been recently suggested by Stephen Walt: the initiation of quiet diplomacy with Beijing to plan jointly for a “post-Kim Jong-il” scenario in the DPRK (Walt, 2010). As accomplished middle power diplomatic practitioners, Australia and South Korea could both explore measures for relating to Beijing on this basis. The long-term benefit of such an approach is that by sending a signal that China should be a “responsible actor” on this crucial problem of regional security, and by approaching Beijing for quiet communication and cooperation rather than demanding it “do something” about the North Koreans, could engender outcomes more favorable to U.S. and allied interests.

This assumption leads to our second proposal: South Korea and Australia should continue to work hand-in-hand to propose, create, and develop regional and international collective security initiatives. Such initiatives should target specific functions or missions related to post-conflict stabilization and non-traditional security objectives (that is, disaster relief or counter-terrorism) at the regional and international level.⁶ The 2009 Action Plan anticipates this approach but it has been somewhat subsequently overshadowed by the recent dramatic events on the Korean peninsula. Even during a time of strategic preoccupation with the “North Korean threat” and with how China may or may not contribute to its eventual mitigation, Seoul and Canberra could do worse than to look for alternatives to underwrite creative approaches to conflict reduction in Northeast Asia. It is this type of allied burden-sharing that seems best to comply with American aspirations for

6. This approach is similar to that recommended by Ungerer and Smith (2010: 15-16), but takes into account the necessity of Chinese and American acquiescence for these middle power initiatives to gain actual substance.

meaningful contributions to collective security by its Asia-Pacific security partners.

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