

The ROK–U.S. Alliance and the Third Offset Strategy

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Abstract

The United States relies on its ability to project military power far forward of its shores in defense of national and allied interests. Yet the diffusion of technology, especially long-range and precision-guided munitions, poses profound challenges to this core assumption undergirding U.S. extended deterrence and alliance contingency response. The U.S. Department of Defense is seeking technological and operational innovations to deal with these unfavorable trends, largely through military modernization programs that are designed to preserve the United States' capacity to deter aggression, dissuade adventurism, reassure allies, and defend allied and national interests in the event of conflict. Most analysis of America's so-called "Third Offset Strategy" has focused on deploying leading-edge technologies to overcome China's military modernization programs. Almost nothing has been written about a Third Offset Strategy through the prism of the Korean Peninsula. Yet the Third Offset Strategy can bolster the alliance's response to North Korea, reinforce deterrence, and support regional security. This paper seeks to fill a gap in the analysis by assessing the emerging U.S. defense programs with respect to North Korea, Peninsula contingencies, and ROK–U.S. alliance cooperation on regional and out-of-area security issues.

Keywords: ROK-U.S. alliance, Third Offset Strategy, regional security, extended deterrence, North Korea

The Third Offset Strategy and North Korea

In November 2014, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) proclaimed defense innovation a major priority. Often reduced to the moniker "Third Offset Strategy" or third offset, the central aim of the innovation effort is to reverse the adverse consequences of proliferated, long-range, precision-strike systems. As Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel argued in the foundational speech launching the initiative, DoD will invest "in our nation's unrivaled capacity for innovation."¹ The

Secretary injected a sense of urgency into the innovation effort, given that America's forward-deployed forces and "unmatched technological and operational edge...is being increasingly challenged."²

Defining the Third Offset Strategy

Declared Secretary Hagel:

Technologies and weapons that were once the exclusive province of advanced nations have become available to a broad range of militaries and non-state actors, from *dangerously provocative North Korea* [emphasis added] to terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda and Hezbollah—all clear threats to the United States and its allies.³

Although the Secretary did not flinch from noting the level playing field accessible to smaller rogue states such as North Korea, he also made clear that the main focus of the third offset was other major powers, reflecting a recent resurgence in great-power competition. This resurgence, Hagel noted, was fueled in part by America's protracted counterinsurgency campaigns, which diverted U.S. attention away from both Asia and more high-end military threats. The United States was "focused on grinding stability operations," said the Secretary of Defense, while Russia and China have been investing in next-generation aircraft, undersea warfare, and a range of anti-ship and air-to-air missiles. Moreover, Moscow and Beijing have concentrated on the new domains of cyber and outer space, along with upgrades in electronic warfare.⁴

Secretary Hagel explained that the United States must take the lead to reverse this threatening trend and not retrench from global leadership. The loss of power projection capability would severely damage U.S. interests, according to Hagel. The world would be "far more dangerous and unstable..." Furthermore, opined Secretary Hagel, our alliances and world order would both suffer. Perceptions matter, because "Questions about our ability to win future wars could undermine our ability to deter them." Finally, said Hagel, the United States would be resigned to putting troops in far greater danger, with the fear of massive casualties crippling America's political will to act for the common defense.⁵

The third offset is a clarion call for maintaining American military superiority. It aims for technological and operational innovations that would keep the U.S. Armed Forces a step ahead of potential opponents

who are fast acquiring the precise means of denying others the ability to access and maneuver forces within hundreds, if not thousands, of miles.

This new offset acknowledges the increasing prevalence of precision-guided munitions, upon which American military dominance has long been predicated. The Third Offset Strategy further seeks to exploit U.S. quantitative advantages in existing systems and qualitative advantages in next-generation systems. At the same time, the initiative seeks renewed investment in operational concepts, war-gaming, and other forms of red-teaming and alternative analysis. But the focus of the Third Offset Strategy is “to help ensure that U.S. military forces can *successfully operate in a world of ubiquitous precision munitions.*”⁶

Weapons capability and accuracy did not achieve breakthroughs overnight. In fact, key elements of America’s past military preeminence are now “central to the defense strategies and plans” of potential U.S. adversaries.⁷ But the United States is also agile, and it has adjusted to previous technological military challenges related to guided-munitions warfare. The third offset follows two prior Cold War initiatives to counteract the Soviet Union’s conventional military superiority.

In the 1950s, the United States doubled down on its advantages in nuclear weapons to offset a large and capable Soviet conventional force threatening Western Europe. In the 1970s, with Moscow having achieved nuclear parity, the previous offset strategy and extended deterrence lost credibility. Thus, during the Carter administration, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown initiated an effort to focus on long-range, precision strike capabilities. The resulting defense forces would nullify Soviet advantages. Today, the challenge is that the “prospect of facing adversaries that employ precision munitions and battle-networks that could consistently or episodically rival our own represents a very significant shift in the global balance of military power.”⁸ It is this challenge that has prompted the search for a third offset.

In the Asia-Pacific region, any discussion of a Third Offset Strategy immediately gravitates toward China. Beijing’s rapid military modernization and growing technological prowess could fundamentally deny U.S. forces access to East Asia and the Western Pacific, as well as deny any forward-stationed U.S. forces the freedom to maneuver, particularly in China’s *san hai* or “three seas”—the Yellow Sea and the East and South China Seas. But these anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) qualities ascribed to Chinese missiles and other systems also apply, albeit to a lesser extent, to smaller military powers such as North Korea.

This essay focuses on how North Korea might pose its own version of an A2/AD or precision-munitions challenge, and how, conversely, America's emphasis on a Third Offset Strategy might affect U.S. extended deterrence and power projection to the Korean Peninsula. In addition to the possible implications for the ROK–U.S. alliance in dealing with Korean contingencies, this paper examines the Third Offset Strategy's ability to contribute to security public goods for the wider region. Regarding this last point, this essay builds on previous research aimed at expanding a U.S. network of allies and partners, and strengthening intra-Asian security relations, in order to provide a resilient, dispersed defense capability to manage a wide range of scenarios.⁹ In sum, the impact of the third offset in dealing with the North Korean threat, strengthening extended deterrence, and supporting alliance out-of-area operations are the three loci of this paper.

The Third Offset Strategy Investments

The fiscal year 2017 budget submission and numerous speeches by senior DoD officials attest to some of the most tangible aspects of a Third Offset Strategy. How will the U.S. spend its defense dollars to evolve the joint force toward one that can operate in a world of ubiquitous precision munitions and prevail against adversaries that can employ them in all warfighting domains?¹⁰ Although a new administration may well change course, at present DoD plans to invest about \$18 billion over five years, with more than \$3.5 billion earmarked for fiscal year 2017.¹¹

When it comes to specifying the technologies and systems most associated with a Third Offset Strategy, experts point to six main areas: anti-access and area-denial, guided munitions, undersea warfare, cyber and electronic warfare, human-machine teaming, and wargaming and the development of new operating concepts.¹² As one defense analyst tallies the budget priorities against these six categories, the FY17 budget contains about \$1 billion in A2/AD spending, as well as half a billion dollars each for guided munitions and undersea warfare. Another \$300 million will be spent on cyber and electronic warfare, about \$200 million on human-machine teaming, and some \$155 million in wargaming and operational concept development.¹³

Two separate DoD entities are spearheading the Third Offset Strategy: the Strategic Capabilities Office (SCO) and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA).¹⁴ The former focuses on

re-evaluating existing programs and improving their capabilities at *relatively* low cost, while the latter focuses on developing next-generation technologies.

The Third Offset Strategy, however, is not solely about maintaining a qualitative technological edge against high-end adversaries. The third offset is also about maintaining a sufficient quantity of forces. This is reflected in the DoD decision to allocate nearly \$500 million to increase the U.S. stockpile of precision munitions, refine the Standard Missile (SM-6) anti-air missile and Tomahawk anti-ship cruise missile, more than triple the payload of Virginia-class submarines, and develop swarming concepts for aerial and underwater drones. As Shawn Brimley notes, “a key component of the Third Offset Strategy is finding ways for U.S. forces to generate more mass or quantity. The focus on the quantitative side of the warfighting equation in these investments portends a very different approach to the status quo in U.S. warfighting strategy and doctrine.”¹⁵

Besides what is known, it is equally important to estimate the level of classified spending on Third Offset Strategy-related programs. An estimated \$6 billion of the \$18 billion of the third offset budget will concentrate on classified military capabilities. It is logical to assume that much of this black program will focus on developing countermeasures to ubiquitous precision-guided munitions. For instance, one can imagine rail-gun, directed-energy weapons, and other new technologies are part of less-public DoD third offset investments. Breakthroughs in one or more technologies may be in the offing, although it is important to realize that even the proverbial “game changer” could well start off as more modest augmentation to existing systems.

These high-end investments are more likely centered on China (and Russia) than they are on countries such as North Korea. But the application of technology may be equally relevant, especially since Pyongyang is investing in many of the same A2/AD programs that characterize the arsenals of major powers. Putting aside North Korea’s impressive attempts at acquiring a full complement of missiles, including nuclear-armed land- and sea-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, Pyongyang is simultaneously fielding less-heralded A2/AD PGMs. For instance, North Korea recently fielded an indigenous 300 millimeter (mm) multiple rocket launcher. North Korea also recently tested the anti-ship version of KN-02 Toksa, extended the range of the anti-ship KN-01 Silkworm missile, and displayed the KN-09 anti-ship cruise

missile. If nuclear weapons comprise a strategic and psychological A2/AD check on possible U.S. intervention, North Korea's PGM advancement can be seen as constituting even more operationally kinetic and mental A2/AD measures.¹⁶

North Korea's Security Challenge

To understand the North Korean military threat, one should begin with an estimate of leadership goals. The principal objective of the Kim family to be not merely regime survival, but to preserve at least the possibility of Korean unification on Pyongyang's terms. This desired end state has been the cornerstone for policy under all three Kim dictators who have led the DPRK. In the eyes of the Kim family, the principal obstacle to unification is the United States. Hence, a prerequisite for improving the chances of unification is the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula, whether by way of peace treaty, an information campaign to weaken U.S. political will to maintain forward-based forces, or diplomatic maneuvers to drive a wedge between the U.S. and the ROK.

North Korea faces its own military requirement for an offset strategy, some asymmetric means of compensating for ROK–U.S. nuclear and qualitative conventional superiority. Indeed, this has been the case since the cessation of major hostilities with the Armistice in 1953. Pyongyang's early efforts focused on psychological offset measures that targeted the U.S. public will to remain engaged on the peninsula. Kim Il-sung aimed to achieve a political offset strategy in 1962, when he laid out his "Four Military Policies"—arm the entire population, fortify the entire country, elevate the entire army to represent the main political elite within North Korea, and modernize the entire military. The bottom line of this offset strategy was to deter U.S. intervention by demonstrating that there was far more to lose than to gain in risking an all-out war with North Korea. With the Vietnam War fully in mind, North Korea hoped to persuade the U.S. that a protracted war would not be winnable, at least not at a politically acceptable cost.

In an effort to offset U.S. influence through physical force, North Korea has also been developing a series of its own advanced-technology programs that collectively might constitute Pyongyang's latest offset strategy. This is an idea expanded on in a forthcoming CNAS paper written by ROK Army Lieutenant General (LTG) (Retired) In-bum Chun.¹⁷ After witnessing U.S. operations on the peninsula, in Vietnam,

in the Gulf, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, North Korea has concluded that no country can compete with a fully committed United States. The size of the U.S. economy is too vast, American public opinion is too easily rallied around a cause, and U.S. airpower is too strong for any opponent. Thus, argues LTG Chun, it was quite a logical decision for North Korea to develop a chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) deterrent to offset U.S. superiority. Along with such weapons of mass-disruption, LTG Chun highlights North Korea's main military challenges to the ROK-U.S. alliance as rockets and missiles, drones and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), GPS jamming, cyber warfare, and miscellaneous covert activities.

In response to these high-tech North Korean threats, the ROK government is responding with its own "Creative National Defense (CND)" strategy. Creative National Defense is quite similar to the basic concepts underlying the Third Offset Strategy, and it is defined as "a new paradigm for defense development by innovative defense values to fuse all defense activities with creativity, science and technology."¹⁸

U.S. Extended Deterrence on the Korean Peninsula

Many experts believe that U.S. extended deterrence has been eroded, and despite countervailing deployments and measures, continues to erode. Even without drawing such a stark conclusion, however, it is worth providing a general framework for thinking about the problem. There are at least four different ways that America's extended deterrence—its conventional and nuclear umbrella meant to deter aggression against the ROK—might lose its saliency.

First, U.S. extended deterrence could be undermined as a result of China's successful military modernization. Beijing's investments in counter-intervention capabilities with A2/AD qualities are of special concern. Combined with China's growing political and economic clout over its neighbors, including on the peninsula, a rapidly modernizing People's Liberation Army (PLA) force could pose such a local threat that future American leaders might not want to risk any action that could escalate into a major regional and possibly nuclear war.

Second, extended deterrence could be fatally weakened on the peninsula by further advancements in North Korea's nuclear arsenal. The most obvious tipping point might result from the deployment of a nuclear-armed Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM) or Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM). This is a near-term challenge,

and one that North Korea has sought to accelerate in 2016 with nuclear and missile tests. Although five failed *Musudan*-missile launches may have frustrated Pyongyang's attempts to deploy a credible system, a sixth such test in June 2016 has been judged at least a partial success.¹⁹ On its current trajectory, North Korea's success in deploying this capability seems just a matter of time.

A third means by which extended deterrence could be compromised might center on a range of asymmetric threats from North Korea. Rather than a single nuclear threat tipping the balance of American political will, the thought here is that a diverse array of asymmetric challenges would convince U.S. leaders to avoid a military intervention against North Korea at all costs. Cyberattacks, unconventional warfare, powerful conventional munitions that could not be prevented from striking Seoul, as well as nuclear missiles, would altogether undermine America's protective umbrella over the ROK.

Fourth and finally, U.S. extended deterrence could be crippled on the peninsula by events external to Northeast Asia. For instance, a major internal crisis or major conflict in Europe or the Middle East might create such a diversion of U.S. attention and resources that North Korea could well conclude that America's security guarantees to Seoul constitute a paper tiger. This is precisely the danger that Secretary Hagel warned of when he rolled out the concept of a Third Offset Strategy.

Because extended deterrence requires a precise understanding of an adversary's calculations, it is impossible to know when, how or why North Korea might cease to find America's military umbrella lacking in credibility. However, that the task of reassuring allies is an even harder task than that of deterrence. It was British Defense Minister Dennis Healey who famously said that "[i]t takes 5 percent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Soviet Union, but 95 percent to assure the Europeans." In the context of this paper, this adage reminds us that even without successfully eroding America's extended deterrence, North Korea, through its own offset strategies, along with other external factors, could pose profound questions about the viability of the U.S. defense commitment.

Regional Security Challenges

This paper has focused on the third offset, both in its strategic and technological sense, and has broached the topic of its impact on North Korea's strategy and on U.S. extended deterrence. The paper now

shifts the discussion to the ROK and regional security, with the aim of considering realistic ways for South Korea to mind its highest-security priority while increasingly contributing to regional security. The paper further highlights ways that the Third Offset Strategy might contribute to this difficult twin set of objectives.

South Korea is a major actor in Northeast Asia and global affairs, but its role in the greater Asia-Pacific region remains relatively modest. This might be considered South Korea's middle-power paradox. This essay addresses some of the chief reasons for the unevenness in South Korea's regional footprint and suggests why Seoul needs to narrow that gap, especially in the realm of security.

Seoul's potential geopolitical clout in Southeast Asia is rarely and barely exercised or at least noted. This limited profile compares sharply with South Korea's activity on and around the Korean Peninsula. President Lee Myung-bak solidified Global Korea, while President Park Geun-hye has focused more on the peninsula and Northeast Asia. Regardless which leader is in power, however, Korea's subregional and global footprint seems larger than its regional one. From Trustpolitik and the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) to the closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex or the decision to deploy a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, South Korea deeply influences the Northeast Asia policy agenda. Similarly, South Korea's global role is often touted just about everywhere except in Southeast Asia, where it tends to have little resonance. From anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden, peacekeeping, and stabilization operations, to trade in electronics and other high-technology products and the combat of global climate change, pandemics, and proliferation, Korea's global role has clearly risen in recent years.

Korea's fixation on Northeast Asia and the peninsula is easily understood. North Korea is a global threat, and South Korea is a principal actor in preventing conflict and steering all Korean people to a brighter future. At the same time, Seoul can hardly ignore its vast and reemerging continental power. Whatever else the back-and-forth debate over THAAD missile defense might reveal, surely the concern Seoul has for Beijing's opinion and Beijing's activism at the expense of Seoul's self-defense say a great deal about Korean-Chinese relations. The fact that South Korean-Japanese relations are riven with historical tensions further reinforces Seoul's more circumscribed view of the Asia-Pacific region.

Korea is so firmly ensconced in Northeast Asia that when the U.S. launched its pivot to Asia in 2011, conventional wisdom held that it had little to do with South Korea. The ROK–U.S. alliance remained focused on the peninsula like a laser beam, and South Korea’s status as a member of the Group of 20 (G-20) nations remained a bridge to the world more than to the rest of Asia. Korea was still heavily dependent on the U.S. for its immediate security, but it was increasingly reliant on China for its economic growth. Maintaining a balance between these two tendencies affected South Korea by constraining its appetite to jeopardize relations with either major power. Surely seeking security entanglements with Japan or with South-China-Sea claimant states in Southeast Asia would only catalyze Beijing to pressure Seoul for ganging up against China. However, South Korea could play a larger role in the wider region, particularly if it is able to place its national interests over the voiced concerns of China. In order to achieve its desired effect, China’s propaganda only has to sow sufficient doubt in the minds of other decision-makers to prevent them from taking any action.

The second main portion of this essay explains where the ROK–U.S. alliance fits into security of the Asia-Pacific region in general and the regional strategy of the United States in particular. Managing a rising China, coping with rising maritime tensions, and dealing with potentially resurgent tensions over Taiwan might all seem security challenges of choice to decision-makers in Seoul who have to concentrate on Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile antics. But South Korea has much to lose if it does not make efforts to help the region find satisfactory ways to address these other regional flashpoints. A capable and prosperous South Korea has much more to contribute throughout the Asia-Pacific region, and not just to Northeast Asia or global issues.²⁰

Importance of ROK–U.S. Alliance for Anchoring U.S. Presence in Asia

Although the U.S. policy of rebalancing to Asia may have been perceived as largely separate from maintaining security on the Korean Peninsula, the ROK–U.S. alliance is central to regional security. It has long served as an anchor for the U.S. presence throughout the Asia-Pacific region. There are several reasons that explain why the alliance architecture is both necessary and efficient for the maintenance of America’s regional security presence.

The first and most obvious reason why Korea helps to anchor

America's regional security role centers on its military presence. Korea is the only location on the Asian continent where the U.S. enjoys a military foothold. And the type of presence matters a good deal. The fact that the majority of infantry troops in Korea consists of soldiers (Eighth U.S. Army) while those in Japan are Marines (III Marine Expeditionary Force) reveals an asymmetry of value placed on different forms of military presence. A presence in Japan serves a marshaling or contingency purpose, whereas a presence in Korea serves a more operational and warfighting function.²¹ Thus, the type of military presence on the peninsula makes Korea the geopolitical "beachhead" for the U.S. in the Asia-Pacific region.

Second, the ROK-U.S. alliance provides physical territory from which to manage the North Korea problem. Conflict with Pyongyang is a functional issue—especially with regard to nuclear proliferation—that cannot be pinned down solely to the chessboard of geopolitics. The ROK-U.S. alliance can help to convert functional solutions into regional presence, as can be seen from the THAAD deployment decision.²² The main purpose of the alliance is to deter North Korea, but "the U.S.-South Korea alliance is a vital tool for both Seoul and Washington to shape Asia's developing regional order and their respective roles within it."²³

Third, the historical value of the alliance cannot be overlooked. The ROK-U.S. alliance itself is a stockpile of practices designed to promote the interests of both nations. The affinity shared by the two countries and its peoples is the stronghold in which alliance interest, stratagem, and diplomacy reside. Not only does such longevity prove how stern the alliance is, but it also serves as a historical revisiting point for the legitimacy of U.S. presence within the Asia-Pacific.

Fourth, both South Korea and the United States share increasing interests in the maritime domain. Korea is geographically a peninsula but geopolitically an island, lacking ground access to the continent. Therefore, conflict in any of the sea lines of communication (SLOCs), let alone the nation's maritime territory, will be detrimental to ROK's national interest. If China truly seeks hegemony over its near seas, it will undermine Korean interests. *Ipsa facto*, Korea has stressed the importance of its access to the maritime commons for decades, but only recently has its voice been heard.²⁴ Korea's position is consistent with America's strategic view on the maritime domain, as well as that of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).²⁵

Finally, the ROK-U.S. alliance does not offset other bilateral ties.

For example, the ROK–U.S. alliance can thrive regardless of the U.S. – Japan alliance and vice versa. This is not because of South Korean and Japanese amity, but because both bilateral security frameworks target similar threats, namely North Korea and, potentially, China. This puts the U.S. in a unique position, where it can worry less about balancing its alliance efforts between Japan and Korea as it had to between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East.²⁶ The U.S. can and should focus on furthering both alliance structures, but need not push too hard for a trilateral one, discounting the cleavage between the two of its best allies.²⁷ Kim Jung-un’s provocations and nuclear and missile programs are the best accelerator of U.S.-Japan-ROK cooperation, while an overly assertive U.S. is the most likely brake on such a natural process.

South Korea’s “Blue Water Fleet” and Jeju Naval Base

Before discussing China and maritime tensions in the East and South China Seas, let us begin by noting South Korea’s growing naval capabilities. The discourse on South Korea’s pursuit of a blue-water navy has been ongoing since the 1990s, as Seoul transformed into an export-centric economy that made the nation chiefly reliant on its SLOCs. At the same time, traditional advocacy for a peninsula-focused littoral navy dwindled as the ROK’s national strength overwhelmed that of its northern rival.

The March 2010 sinking of the *ROKS Cheonan*, which was perceived by some naval critics as a penetration in the brown waters, seemed to turn the table.²⁸ The incident reminded South Koreans of their prime foe, North Korea, and confidence in building an ambitious oceanic navy suffered a serious setback. The confidence was gradually restored, however, in part through actions such as the ROK Navy (ROKN) Underwater Demolition and SEAL teams’ successful anti-piracy operation in the waters off of Somalia.²⁹ The blue-water-fleet momentum is very much still alive within South Korea.

In February 2016, the ROKN opened a naval base at Jeju Island, located at the southernmost seas of Korea. The facility is home to the recently commissioned ROKN 7th Task Flotilla, which is the first ROK flotilla designed to sail for expeditionary purposes. Through the opening ceremony, South Korean leaders have underscored the importance of safeguarding Korea’s vital SLOCs around the globe.³⁰ Despite some criticism from leftist political opposition, which argues that opening a naval base will likely result in further militarization and, therefore,

instability in the region, most Koreans appear to accept the fact that South Korea has grown to a point where it requires an open-ocean navy.³¹ Increased interest in the deep waters has led South Korea to rethink its current and future naval strategy.

The ROK faces local, regional, and global maritime challenges. First, it has to maintain superiority over North Korea in its littorals. Second, it has to be able to deny neighboring powers in its close seas, which involves the danger of territorial disputes. Finally, it has to protect SLOCs throughout the world's oceans.³² In any case, it is clear that South Korea ought to maintain a fleet that is both sufficient in size and capability to deny naval conflicts within its perimeter and maneuverable enough to project force to distant sea lanes if necessary.³³

Although dwarfed by its strong neighbors, the ROK has raised a dependable navy that ranks 8th in the world. It has a total of 177 ships in action, including 12 destroyers, a large-deck amphibious vessel, 12 submarines, and 65,000 sailors.³⁴ Considering the overwhelming size and number of its neighbors' fleets, the most feasible naval structure for South Korea would be a fleet that can maintain maritime superiority at its littorals, while avoiding decisive naval battle in the oceans.³⁵ Strategically, the new Jeju Naval Base provides a harbor suitable for both purposes.

The question, however, remains how South Korea's mounting naval capabilities will or could be used to safeguard Asian waters, including in both the East and South China Seas. This question, in turn, depends on the role South Korea might play vis-à-vis China. This paper now turns to that issue, particularly the question of U.S. expectations of its South Korean ally in maritime Asia.

Expectations and Mechanisms Regarding China

The national interest of all major states in Asia continues to be in the maintenance of a regional order in which all can prosper and live in peace. A degree of cooperation and transparency with neighbors is important. For instance, managing North Korea will require clear channels of communication with China, especially in a crisis.

But the expectations of the U.S. are that South Korea, like all nations, should be allowed the right of self-defense. Seoul should not have to sacrifice that fundamental right of sovereignty because of the coercive tactics of a larger power. Beyond this, the U.S. looks increasingly to middle powers such as South Korea to help underwrite

the regional and global rules of the road. In the Asia-Pacific region, this increasingly requires Korea to become engaged in the ongoing tensions over rules, norms, and order at sea.

While only North Korea appears to pose a real threat of inter-state war, however, lower-level coercive diplomacy can sap trust and trigger an arms race and skirmishes that could escalate. The metaphor of the boiling frog is often invoked to explain the security situation in maritime Asia. If China is allowed a veto on a South Korean deployment of a THAAD missile defense battery, then what military upgrade by any neighbor does China not wish to veto? In other words, deference to Beijing that becomes a practice in effect Finlandizes the region. The frog of Asian national defense is thus slowly boiled to death. Hence, President Park's decision to support the deployment of a THAAD missile battery in Seongju County—more than 130 miles southeast of Seoul—is welcomed.³⁶ However, that deployment could take up to two years to be completed, which could leave it up to President Park's successor.

Between the extremes of a capable South Korean naval role joining an anti-China coalition and doing nothing, there is ample room for Seoul to press forward on its interests with respect to growing tensions in maritime Asia. The U.S. has an interest in not only harnessing the ROK capabilities as a counterweight to possible aggression, but it also shares a direct interest with Seoul in not allowing the ROK–U.S. alliance from becoming too detached from the real security challenges in the Asia-Pacific region.

Specifically, one can imagine South Korea stepping up to maritime security challenges posed particularly by China in the following ways:

- **Support arbitration and other means of resolving disputes peacefully:** In the aftermath of the South China Sea arbitration ruling on July 12, 2016, Seoul has an opportunity to join many other nations in declaring support for the rule of law, including the process of peaceful resolution of disputes put forward in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).
- **Embrace the rule of law and regional norm-building:** More generally, South Korea should find additional opportunities to support UNCLOS and regional norms, including advocating for a binding Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

- **Contribute to maritime transparency:** The U.S. is working with regional allies and partners to create a transparency regime in the South China Sea. Tapping into multiple layers of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, both military and civilian, erecting a common operating picture would be a regional public good. South Korea has the means to contribute to a wider maritime common operating picture that could help deal with a wide range of contingencies, from disasters to maritime coercion. Third offset technologies can help South Korea with remote sensing capabilities, both on the peninsula and for the wider maritime region.
- **Join freedom of navigation patrols:** The U.S. is conducting regular Freedom of Navigation operation (FONOP) patrols to uphold international law. Other countries should do likewise, both in multilateral groupings and unilaterally. Whereas Japan's direct participation in a multilateral FONOP in the South China Sea would exacerbate tensions with China, participation by countries other than Japan—including Australia, India, and South Korea—would remind China that the South China Sea is a vital international waterway on which all major trading countries depend.
- **Conduct more frequent multilateral maritime exercises throughout the Indo-Pacific region:** Seoul's blue-water capabilities mean that South Korea is better able to regularly engage in more numerous and sophisticated multilateral exercises throughout the Indo-Pacific.
- **Build partner capacity:** Korean professionalism throughout its armed forces, law enforcement, and coast guard suggests that South Korea is well poised to help build the capacity of key partners, especially of South China Sea littoral countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Korea is already engaged in some high-profile defense co-production efforts, such as a fighter program with Jakarta, but it should also engage at more operational levels to train and educate forces to work with others in the region. These efforts can contribute to what can be called the Asian power web, a looser network of

partners who might be better able to work together should the circumstances require it.

- **Ensure maritime tensions in Asia remain high on the regional and global diplomatic agenda:** As both a Northeast Asian and middle power, South Korea has a responsibility to ensure that maritime disputes are raised high and kept high on the agendas of major forums, both ASEAN-centered institutions such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN-Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), but also the United Nations and other international conferences.

All of these steps would be useful and should allow South Korea to grow its footprint throughout Asia without undermining its crucial interests.

ROK–ASEAN Relations and South Korea's Future Role in the Region

South Korea is increasing its bilateral ties within the region through a multilayered approach of bilateral agreements, summits, defense sales, and combined operations.

Over the past 10 years, the ROK signed a total of 39 bilateral security agreements, 14 with Asia-Pacific countries.³⁷ In 2014 alone, South Korea's defense exports hit \$3.6 billion, with major deals including a \$1.2 billion contract to build six corvettes, or small warships, for the Royal Malaysian Navy and a \$420 million bid by the Philippines for 12 FA-50 fighter jets. According to a recent IHS Balance of Trade report, South Korea is forecast to generate more revenue from defense exports than China by 2016.³⁸ President Park alone has held a total of 20 bilateral summits with heads of ASEAN members during her 3-year presidency, mostly on a yearly basis.³⁹ Exercises are held routinely among ROK and ASEAN members, including Cobra Gold, RIMPAC, and the most recently announced ADMM-Plus.⁴⁰

Adding to the list of ROK–ASEAN ties, Southeast Asian nations and ROK are alike in that they share the dilemma of balancing itself between China's growing economic influence and dependence on U.S. security. Unlike Japan, which ASEAN sees in a straight line with the U.S., or China, which ASEAN perceives as a possible threat itself, the ROK is seen by ASEAN through lenses with a lighter political hue.⁴¹ This is most likely a product of Seoul's efforts to maintain a balanced position

between the U.S. and China, as well as a byproduct of the Korean peoples' enduring suspicion toward Japan's possible remilitarization.

The ROK's relatively low profile in the Southeast Asian region is the third ingredient. Regional indifference is a fertile soil for neutrality. ASEAN members tend to sympathize more easily with the ROK as they "experience the same illness (*dong'byung'sang'ryun* (同病相憐))" of having to balance in between the great powers. Such environment is permissive to a profound multilateral security architecture between Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia, with the ROK at the epicenter.⁴²

Such an architecture aligns with U.S. interests as well. First, the U.S. can leverage its position within the region by maximizing the roles of allies. As vital security interests in the region multiply, it may not be wise for the U.S. to hold on to the "hub and spokes" model unaltered. Certain roles and responsibilities should be distributed to regional stakeholders, albeit in different manners and through different mechanisms. Thus, the recent turn by the U.S. to support a regional network or power web can provide an essential complement to existing alliances. It is *unlikely* that any ASEAN country or Korea will simply cut itself free from the economic shackles of China and queue behind the U.S. It is *unbeneficial* for the U.S. to stand still while half of the regional players drift toward China. That said, a middle power that can mediate between the hub and spokes will allow the U.S. to manage the region with less effort. It is like adding a new gear to the alliance mechanics.

Indeed, having South Korea, a democratic alliance partner contributing to Southeast Asia's diplomacy, security and development offers the U.S. a broad range of cooperative opportunities and an alternative to the region overly reliant on countries that are not America's allies or democracies.⁴³

The discourse of the "gear" inevitably raises the question of how to measure the ROK's intent or how to stop the whole framework from balancing itself as a third power in between the two world powers. However, one must not forget that the ROK's utmost security priority lies in intra-peninsula issues, and that the ROK-U.S. alliance is the very structure that deals with these issues. As long as the alliance remains to serve its purpose, chances for the ROK-ASEAN polity to cast away is also thin. The current crisis in the South China Sea as well as the aforementioned history of the alliance cements this logic.

This option is in turn beneficial to the ROK-U.S. alliance, too, in that a stronger regional architecture will inherently lead to the

strengthening and proliferation of allied values—conformity to international norms, a human rights-guaranteed democracy, and a more coherent ROK–U.S. partnership, to name a few. That is far more feasible *and* beneficial than ASEAN aligning with China or Japan. Consequentially, the act of a "silent wingman" like the ROK could prove to be far more beneficial than that of your "best friend" like Japan.

Returning to South Korea's Regional Role in History and Why It Matters in the Future

Despite being eclipsed by weightier issues on the peninsula, the ROK's role in the region and the world has been noteworthy. Meaningful contributions include both soft agendas such as climate change and peace establishment to hard operations such as nonproliferation and counter-piracy.

Notable among the efforts are security contributions to the region and the world. The Chonghae Anti-Piracy Unit is currently on its 20th rotation to protect the Gulf of Aden, and has led several successful operations including the rescuing of the Norwegian-owned and ROK-operated freighter MV Samho Jewelry.⁴⁴ South Korea has also sent some 5,000 troops to reinstall peace and stability in Afghanistan. Korea deployed a total of 20,000 troops to Iraq from 2003 to 2008, and—of historical importance—more than 325,000 troops to the jungles of Vietnam to fight alongside their U.S. brothers.

The reason the ROK has strived so enthusiastically to achieve regional and global goals is not solely to line-up behind the U.S. or gain practical benefits. If that were the case, Korea's outreach to the world would have dissolved as soon as it saw the Soviet Union collapse. Rather, it was the international structure on which ROK had flourished that led to the inevitable "outgoingness" of ROK. And this remains unchanged in the 21st century.

So South Korea must understand that advocacy of its regional role and affirmation of the authorities of international rules are in line with Seoul's national interests, especially when Korea wishes to exemplify itself as a manifestation of the successful international system. In fact, *not* advocating for its interests regionally could harm Korean interests.

For instance, although it may seem wise to distance itself from regional security issues, refraining from speaking on the contested South China Sea may mute Korea (and its allies) in the foreseeable future if, and when, the dispute spreads to the Yellow Sea. On the other hand,

voicing concerns about international norms today could help Korea gain a precedential advantage against Japan's assertion over Dokdo/Takeshima (Liancourt Rocks).

As a country that continuously strives to weigh in as a middle power, South Korea should start to “chew gum while walking” for its own practical advantage. It is only natural that the overlapping areas of national interest in regional and global affairs should expand as the nation grows.

Both Korea and the United States have an abiding interest in shrinking the gap that has heretofore existed between Korea's power and its influence on the Asia-Pacific region as a whole.

Potential Benefits of the Third Offset Strategy

This paper has discussed the Third Offset Strategy, and its impact on Korean Peninsula contingencies and deterrence. The most important way the third offset can help preserve extended deterrence on the Peninsula is analogous to how it is intended to help preserve U.S. power projection capability despite the proliferation of precision-strike capabilities with A2/AD effects. At a minimum, third offset technologies and concepts of operations might be able to avoid the current trend in North Korean nuclear and missile programs—a trend that threatens to erode the credibility of America's nuclear umbrella and defense commitment. More ambitiously, a Third Offset Strategy could catalyze the search for a new ROK–U.S. alliance strategy to regain the initiative, both in this period of unstable peace but also in the midst of a potential future crisis. The aim of this latter ambition should be to convince North Korea to eventually relinquish dreams of becoming a recognized nuclear-weapon state and committing even more lethal acts of provocation.

While third offset offers the promise of preserving extended deterrence and bolstering alliance strategy vis-à-vis North Korea, it also has to be recognized that there are potential downsides to a Third Offset Strategy when examined through the prism of the Korean Peninsula. Among those potential risks are the possibility of: (1) *increasing the chances that a crisis could lead to conflict that rapidly escalates to nuclear war*; (2) *driving up defense costs that only further call into question domestic political support for sustaining forward-based alliances*; and (3) *widening the gap in technological capability between U.S. and ROK forces*. In the case of the first issue, third-offset

technologies could convince Pyongyang that it needs to adopt a “use-it-or-lose-it” launch policy, lest an increasingly capable alliance preempt North Korea’s finite arsenal. The second issue concerns the likelihood that leading-edge technologies will continue to incur mounting costs, straining limited defense budgets at a time when aging populations and entitlements might further constrain resources. The indirect result could be to embolden those Americans who favor retrenchment over the forward defense of allies. Finally, even if the U.S. succeeds in fielding systems to strengthen its capabilities, the practical political fallout from attempting to share ultrasensitive technologies with any ally could end up being counterproductive. If technology were not transferred, then it would breed resentment inside South Korea, but probably not before a debilitating political debate occurred within the U.S. over protecting its industrial secrets. But while these real issues need to be addressed within the alliance, they are not insuperable obstacles. For instance, for North Korea, fearing any outside military intervention would jeopardize the regime, there may be little firebreak between conventional war and nuclear-weapon use; third offset technologies can reinforce deterrence of any conflict rather than contribute to nuclear escalation. Moreover, to keep costs down and minimize a technology gap in the alliance going forward, bilateral security mechanisms must be fully joined to reduce the risk of decoupling and conflict rather than inadvertently contribute to a two-tier alliance with respect to cost or technology. On balance, the third offset offers some potential benefits for stealing away North Korea’s nuclear momentum and reinforcing deterrence. Integrating third offset technologies into comprehensive strategies will be essential, however, if these obstacles are to be overcome.

This paper has also analyzed an expanded a regional security role for the ROK, particularly with the Third Offset Strategy in mind. This latter question is especially difficult; one must caution that goals need to be kept realistic and that third offset is no panacea for ROK regional and alliance clout. Even so, third offset can help the ROK and the ROK-U.S. alliance with some of the core challenges of peninsular and regional security.

It is understandable why the ROK does not or, more accurately, cannot delve into a new ocean of regional goals. This takes the discourse back to the North Korea problem. The ROK is a nation that is constantly threatened by a proximate and predictably unpredictable nuclear-armed adversary. It is also a nation that has seen almost every line of policy,

hard and soft alike, fail to solve the problem. Accordingly, the ROK can hardly be blamed for weighing its security priorities toward inter-peninsula issues. The regional security burden-sharing load that the ROK is willing to carry, therefore, will vary according to several political variables, domestic and foreign, peninsular and regional.

It is reasonable to expect the ROK to begin its regional outreach on the periphery of the peninsula, starting in the Yellow Sea and East China Sea, and then further extending its reach from those near seas. But there are ways that the Third Offset Strategy could help the ROK contribute more to regional security, without neglecting its overriding priority of dealing with North Korea.

First, the Third Offset Strategy can alleviate the ROK's inter-peninsula security concerns, making room for South Korea to turn more of its attention to regional issues. With 600,000 men and women who mostly serve under mandatory conscription, ROK Forces have tended to become personnel-centric operations. About 100,000 soldiers are thinly dispersed along the 248-kilometer (km)-long Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and fewer than 10,000 Marines patrol the 255 km-long western shorelines of Ganghwa Island. Introducing machine-based reconnaissance systems at the front lines could cut costs, free up personnel, and improve reliability.

Among the specific third offset capabilities mentioned by Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work, countermeasures against electronic and cyber warfare would seem to hold promise for Seoul, which is increasingly concerned about a spate of recent GPS jamming and hacking attempts made by its northern foe. In addition, undersea warfare systems—including Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUV) that are capable of automated hunter-killer operations—could take significant burdens off the shoulders of the ROK naval forces. This makes good sense considering the fact that North Korea's naval threat comes mostly from under the water.

Second, the third offset can also boost the ROK regional security role in the area of missile defense. The Third Offset Strategy is focused in large measure on countering precision-guided munitions, and technologies that contribute to that mission can also help the ROK to participate in an increasingly effective regional network of missile defense systems. While South Korean defenses can manage North Korea's conventional threats, Seoul will continue to want international support to address Pyongyang's nuclear threat. Working with not just

the U.S. but also Japan, the ROK has the best means of neutralizing North Korea's nuclear weapons.

By adopting, implementing, and practicing next-generation missile defense systems associated with the Third Offset Strategy, the ROK could provide itself a more capable missile defense that in turn would be greatly strengthened by integrating with similar regional systems. Although it is speculative at this moment, perhaps a triangular grid of ROK-Japan-U.S. Aegis platforms with advanced Standard Missile-3 interception systems aboard will synergize regional missile defense capabilities. An upgraded version of the THAAD system that is capable of Boost Phase Interception could also enhance missile defense, yet on a different level, by empowering the allies with more time windows to intercept North Korean missile threats toward ROK and U.S. soil.

Using the missile defense capabilities on a smaller scale generates a different story. Platform defense systems could increase the survivability of vessels against anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) threats, allowing them to sail farther out untethered to its fleet. This is because extending the reach of navies requires some assurance of defenses that are limited by land-based systems or the range of land-based aircraft. The ROK Navy's use of Jeju Naval Base, which is located farthest South off the Peninsula, would allow the ROK Navy to easily lengthen its range of effective operations into much of Asia.

Third, the Third Offset Strategy may allow the ROK to develop a security network with ASEAN and its members. Unlike Japan and to a lesser extent South Korea, most Southeast Asian countries are not able to afford the exquisite technology envisaged by a Third Offset Strategy. As one of the leading countries in both import and export of defense products, the ROK could use its industry to narrow the technological gap between the U.S. and ASEAN and its members.

In operational terms, the ROK-U.S. alliance can test and train doctrinal developments that follow the Third Offset Strategy. The wealth of experience derived from managing the longstanding ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command would be invaluable in helping to train selected Southeast Asian countries. For instance, the ROK-U.S. combined Marine exercise and training programs is both strong and particularly relevant to archipelagic Southeast Asia. These combined exercise and training activities undertaken by the U.S. Marine Corps and ROK Marines, emphasize true interoperability, including cross-decking

aircraft on ships or exchanging assault amphibious vehicles afloat through combined splash and recovery.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned potentials of the Third Offset Strategy on Korea, perhaps the most crucial application of the strategy is the strategy itself: Open discussions on the new strategy will elicit attention from North Korea, and force the already-impooverished nation to push itself harder to devise countermeasures. Not to our surprise, North Korea seems to have devised its rhetoric first, in response to the recent discussion panel on this very paper.

Former officials and experts on East Asian affairs of the U.S. at a recent seminar held at Georgetown University reportedly asserted that "third offset strategy" should be applied to the Korean Peninsula as muscle-flexing like joint military drills and introduction of strategic bombers cannot thwart the "nuclear and missile threat" coming from the DPRK... The DPRK is fully capable of making any strategy of the U.S. go belly-up determinedly, to say nothing of the "third offset strategy."⁴⁵

The Third Offset Strategy can also help to redefine what deterrence on the Peninsula should look like.

The line of military thinking—from traditional military strategy such as strategic paralysis to modern operational concepts such as effects-based operations—is skewered by a single canon called "efficiency." The Third Offset Strategy is on the same line; it aims to generate new ways to do more with less. Such new ways of thinking may engender stratagem that are more permissive to efficient-yet-radical operations.

Decapitation operations or surgical strike are good examples. Offsetting the adversary's determination to pull the trigger will prove to be more efficient than offsetting the actual means of attack, especially against states that have a centralized trigger. Targeting the political center of gravity with state-of-the-art technology will probably be the only way to truly deter North Korea from launching a nuclear weapon.

Much more thought needs to be devoted to the implication of the third offset for South Korea and the U.S.-ROK alliance, for Korean Peninsula contingencies, and Korea's regional security contributions. This paper has initiated what should be a serious alliance dialogue.

Notes:

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² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Shawn Brimley, “Stumbling into Focus: The Pentagon’s Third Offset Strategy & and the Asia Rebalance,” Draft Paper for CNAS, May 2016.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See Patrick M. Cronin, et al., *The Emerging Asia Power Web: The Rise of Bilateral Intra-Asian Security Ties* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, June 2013) and Patrick M. Cronin, Mira Rapp-Hooper, and Harry Krejsa, *Dynamic Balance: An Alliance Requirements Roadmap for the Asia-Pacific Region* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, May 2016).

¹⁰ Brimley, “Stumbling into Focus: The Pentagon’s Third Offset Strategy & and the Asia Rebalance.”

¹¹ Mackenzie Eaglen, “What is the Third Offset Strategy?” *RealClearDefense*, February 2, 2016, http://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/02/16/what_is_the_third_offset_strategy_109034.html.

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¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Regarding the SCO, public reports started to circulate in early 2016. For example, see Sam LaGrone, “Little Known Pentagon Office Key to U.S. Military Competition with China, Russia,” *U.S. Naval Institute News*, February 2, 2016, <https://news.usni.org/2016/02/02/little-known-pentagon-office-key-to-u-s-military-competition-with-china-russia>.

¹⁵ Brimley, “Stumbling into Focus: The Pentagon’s Third Offset Strategy & and the Asia Rebalance.”

¹⁶ In-bum Chun, “North Korea’s Third Offset Strategy,” Draft Paper for CNAS, April 2016.

¹⁷ LTG Chun’s paper is slated to be published by the end of 2016 as part of a CNAS project report on Korea and the Third Offset Strategy. After a distinguished career in the ROK Army, Lieutenant General Chun retired from active duty in July 2016.

¹⁸ In-bum Chun, “North Korea’s Third Offset Strategy,” Draft Paper for CNAS, April 2016.

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