



**“NEW BEGINNINGS” IN THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE**  
**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**  
April 2008

With the inauguration in February of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak—who will visit the United States this week for meetings with President Bush—The Korea Society and Stanford University’s Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center launched a nonpartisan group of former senior U.S. government officials, scholars, and other American experts on Korea to explore how to revitalize the U.S. alliance with the Republic of Korea (ROK) after nearly a decade of strains and tensions.

The members of this “New Beginnings” policy research study group concluded—based on intensive meetings in Seoul with Lee, his top advisers, the opposition, and other Korean leaders—that the United States has a major opportunity to bolster and broaden its relationship with the ROK. President Lee seeks a global partnership with the United States, and the South Korean public has become much more supportive of the alliance in the past few years. Lee’s fixed five-year tenure will coincide with the entire first term of the next U.S. president, allowing the two new leaders an extended period of cooperation.

Surrounded by a rising China, a more assertive Russia, a Japan seeking a greater international role, and a nuclear North Korea, the ROK can play a key role in working with the United States to maintain peace and stability in East Asia. No effort to address the nuclear and other challenges posed by North Korea is likely to succeed without the closest U.S.-South Korean cooperation.

The ROK, as the world’s thirteenth-largest economy and one of Asia’s most democratic countries, is a model of the virtues of a market economy, of the values of freedom and human rights, and of alignment with the United States. The two countries are also bound together by personal ties: two million people of Korean descent live in the United States, and over 100,000 Koreans come to the United States each year for study and exchanges, more than from any other country.

President Lee’s election reflects four key changes in South Korea: (1) a shift from the political left back toward the center; (2) greater skepticism about North Korea; (3) increased wariness of China; and (4) enhanced support for the U.S.-ROK alliance. The protests against the United States seen in South Korea in 2002 no longer reflect the reality there. Lee places top priority on invigorating the ROK’s partnership with the United States while maintaining good relations with Japan, China, and Russia. He favors improved relations with North Korea and is willing to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il. In major departures from the earlier “Sunshine” policy, however, Lee will not provide large-scale economic assistance to the North until *after* it abandons its nuclear weapons program, and he has criticized human rights abuses in North Korea. Lee supports continued food and other humanitarian aid to the people of North Korea.

New Beginnings group members believe that the United States cannot afford to lose the opportunity presented by President Lee’s desire to build a global partnership. We have identified several steps that the United States, in cooperation with the ROK, could take to move the alliance into a new era. The New Beginnings group plans to continue its own efforts in support of that goal.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO U.S. POLICYMAKERS

- **Global Partnership**—Building on the cooperation between Presidents Bush and Lee, the new U.S. president next year should issue a vision statement with Lee detailing their partnership and goals for the alliance. To advise them, the two new presidents should establish a bi-national panel of distinguished Koreans and Americans. The United States and the ROK should also give increased emphasis to the foreign ministerial strategic dialogue they initiated in 2006.
- **Security Alliance**—We support the ongoing realignment of U.S. forces in the ROK. Congress should increase its budget for the relatively small U.S. portion of the total cost of its implementation. The decision to transfer wartime operational control of Korean forces back to the ROK in 2012 was likewise correct, but the United States should respond positively to any South Korean proposal to discuss conditions related to the transfer. We welcome the Lee administration's apparent desire to review the main North Korea war plan and to prepare jointly for other contingencies, including that of a North Korean collapse. The United States should conduct regular, joint consultations with South Korea and other allies in East Asia to determine whether security conditions warrant changes in our respective force levels, and, if so, in what direction.
- **North Korea**—The ROK election has brought the United States and South Korea into essential agreement, for the first time in seven years, on how to deal with North Korea and its nuclear aspirations. To avoid the danger that their North Korea policies will again diverge, they must establish stronger consultative mechanisms, including with Japan.
- **Economy and Trade**—Congress should ratify the KORUS FTA now. U.S. failure to approve the FTA would not only represent foregone business opportunities; it would damage U.S.-ROK relations and be seen by the international community as a weakening of U.S. self-confidence and engagement, in East Asia and around the globe.
- **People-to-People Ties**—The U.S. government should set an early target date to include the ROK in the Visa Waiver Program and encourage the Korean government to support a major expansion of the Fulbright Program's English Teaching Assistant Program. The United States should create a new program to allow U.S. federal employees to intern in Korean ministries and increase the budget for the State Department's International Visitor Program for young South Korean leaders. U.S. military personnel stationed in Korea should be joined by their families. Finally, the United States should, at long last, construct a new U.S. embassy in Seoul.

The full report is available at <http://aparc.stanford.edu/> and [www.koreasociety.org](http://www.koreasociety.org).

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