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The US interest is to share the security burden in northeast Asia

Interview with Hahm Chaibong

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Antoine Bondaz (Asia Centre)
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Hahm Chaibong is the President of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in Seoul, one of the leading think tanks in Korea. Previously, he was a professor at the School of International Relations and the Department of Political Science as well as the Director of the Korean Studies Institute at the University of Southern California (2005-2007) and Director of the Division of Social Sciences Research & Policy at UNESCO in Paris, France (2003-2005). He has been a visiting professor at Duke, Georgetown, and Princeton Universities.

This interview was made by Antoine Bondaz, associate fellow at Asia Centre, at the Asan Institute, on March 17, 2014. In this interview, Dr. Hahm explores not only the depth of the ROKUS alliance, the problems it faces and its future, but also South Korea's relations to its "less than friendly" neighbor, Japan, and its first economic partner, China.

Antoine Bondaz: *President Park has been seeking a more balanced diplomacy between the USA and China. Seoul seems to be more proactive in dealing with Beijing, in particular on the North Korean issue, following the Presidential summit in Beijing, last June. Should Washington be concerned about a possible Sino-Korean strategic rapprochement?*

Hahm Chaibong: I know that the Americans say they are not concerned about it, and they are right to say they would want a good relation between South Korea and China. I have seen reports, people, expressing that concern especially right after the very successful summit in June, and clearly the Chinese are courting us. But I would say the US is not that concerned since it is more concerned about South Korea's relationship with North Korea, and Japan's relationship with North Korea. If these relationships evolve, it could be contravening the long standing implicit agreement of the 6 Party Talks that unless North Korea makes some significant gestures towards denuclearization, we should not have talks except on side-issues such as divided families.

Of course, as a general rule and in the long run, for instance when it comes to unification and of course post-unification, there may be some US concerns about where Korea would stand between the two giants. It's easy for people to imagine that there may be a debate within South Korea on who to side with. But I think our government and our experts are smart, and know we should never show that we are leaning towards one of the two. It is just not an option for us. We genuinely need both the US and China on our side. The moment the US starts suspecting that we are getting too close to China, our diplomacy would have failed, failed miserably. That would be a disaster.

71 boulevard Raspail
75006 Paris - France
Tél. : +33 1 75 43 63 20
Fax. : +33 1 75 43 63 23
www.centreasia.eu
contact@centreasia.eu
siret 484236641.00029

However, there may be another legitimate concern in the US that China is trying to put a wedge between Seoul and Tokyo, for instance to prevent a strengthening of the US-Japan-ROK ties, which aims to contain the rise of China. But so far, the US is not overly concerned.

Antoine Bondaz: Secretary of State Kerry and Assistant Secretary of State Russell have both expressed concerns about the state of South Korea – Japan relations, which deterioration could be seen as going against US interests. What can the US do? Could it mediate?

The US has never said it wants to mediate. It said it should never try to mediate, insisting that it is a bilateral issue, even though it hopes for an improvement¹. There is definitely an expectation on the part of the South Koreans that the US will pressure Japan. There is very little room for South Korea to maneuver; there is nothing that president Park can do at the current stage. If she had tried to do anything positive towards Japan without Japan first making a move, it would have been devastating in terms of public opinion.

Clearly, there is the expectation on the South Korean side and there is a felt need among US policymakers that the US needs to do something. The US can't be seen as mediating but it has to do something. And it has been doing it very openly, to a far greater extent and far more openly than we and the US had ever expected. The US never expected it would be in a position where it would openly chastise the Japanese government.

We are at a point where everything is settled for it to be a mediation, including putting a lot of pressure on Japan. And there are signs everywhere that the US is indeed pressuring Japan. We definitely see the result of that with the visit of the Japanese Vice minister of foreign affairs to Seoul a few days ago. Even though he has come with nothing and left earlier than expected, the visit has made it clear that the Japanese are under shear pressure from the US.

Finally, the reason why Abe said yesterday his government would adhere to apologies for wartime behavior made by past cabinets in 1993 and 1995², is Obama's coming visit to Japan and South Korea. Something has to happen between the two US allies before Obama's April trip to East Asia. Obama cannot just come without anything and leave with the bilateral relations unchanged, as bad as it is. That's an unacceptable scenario for the USA. For Obama's visit to be seen as a success; Park and Abe have to shake hands or at least to have minimum gestures before the visit, and the only chance of that happening would be at the nuclear summit in La Hague, next week. Prime Minister Abe has to make a gesture and create an atmosphere before he could even think of meeting with President Park Geun-Hye³. He has to avoid President Park to simply spurn him at the summit. And the US plays a great role in the thaw in Japan and South Korea's relations.

¹ On the deterioration of the ROK-Japan relationship: Constance Magnanou, « Le poids de l'histoire: la méfiance coréenne vis-à-vis des nouvelles orientations de défense japonaises », *Korea Analysis*, n°2, Asia Centre, mars 2014.

² The apologies were issued by then chief cabinet secretary Yohei Kono in 1993 and then premier Tomiichi Murayama in 1995

³ On March 18, the day after this interview, the USA offered to hold a trilateral summit on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit.

As far as the Korean experts are concerned, the extent to which the US has intervened has been quite exceptional, all the more since we know that in parallel there is this massive public relations blitz in Washington from the Japanese.

Nobody says this but we appreciate the US trying to play a constructive role despite the US support for Abe in his attempt to reform Japan's collective self-defense right. Even though the US fully appreciates Abe's willingness to play a greater role in the regional strategic affairs and has been asking for Japan to do so for a very long time, the US understands clearly that the political deadweight Abe brings by raising historical issues is completely undermining all the other positive steps he is making.

Antoine Bondaz: The US is very proactive on the Japan-ROK bilateral issue. Meanwhile, since Hilary Clinton and Kurt Campbell left office, and with the recent events in Europe (Crimea) and in the Middle East (nuclear deal with Iran), many have raised concerns about the end of the US rebalancing strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. From a South Korean point of view, how credible is the US rebalancing strategy. Is it mostly gesture politics or a deeper US strategy?

First, the idea of a pivot was very real in the minds of Hillary Clinton and Kurt Campbell. It is not very real in John Kerry's mind. With Clinton, Campbell and Donilon gone⁴, there is nobody who is even interested in East Asia in the White House anymore. The only one is Daniel Russell but I don't think he can carry the weight just by himself. We understand that the pivot is turning out to be far less than what we had expected and that impression is shared across Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia.

Second, as many in the USA have pointed out, it was a mistake to even label that policy in such as fashion, all the more when you can't follow it up with concrete actions. It has created all kinds of false expectations and false alarms. It has unnecessarily alarmed the Chinese and even questioned whether the USA had left the region.

Third, and overall, the most worrying element is that there is a public sense that the US is weakening relatively to the Chinese, that there is a fatigue among the US elites about their international engagement. It shows the US foreign policy has been less than successful in making its allies and friends more comfortable.

Interestingly enough, I think that Shinzo Abe and Kim Jong-eun are the ones sustaining the US interest and presence in the region, and not anything we are doing. Abe has been singularly successful in keeping the US attention on East Asia and of course, Kim Jong-eun too. Had Kim Jong-eun been quietly consolidating its power base without letting everybody know who he killed, and had Abe focused on economic reforms and just quietly started to revise things for collective self-defense without visiting the Yasukuni shrine and raising all sort of historical issues, nobody would have paid attention to our region.

It's very interesting that it's our enemy to the North, and

⁴ Hillary Clinton was the US Secretary of State in the first Obama administration, Kurt Campbell was her Assistant Secretary of State for Asia-Pacific affairs and Tom Donilon, President Obama's National Security Advisor (2010-2013).

less than friendly neighbor to the East that have succeeded in keeping the US attention sharply focus. Abe's behavior even made them understand the historical issues between our two countries as many US policymakers did not really understand them.

Antoine Bondaz: *Coming back to the bilateral relations between South Korea and the USA, Defense minister Kim Kwan-jin stated that the transfer of the OPCON to South Korea in December 2015 would be "inappropriate", asking implicitly for a new delay. Meanwhile, Korea has been reluctant to increase its financial participation to the SMA⁵, to the point that some foreign experts wonder whether South Korea is free riding on the USA for its security. How can the two allies share the defense burden in a time of budget constraint in the USA?*

I fully understand not only US concerns but also the reason why the US is fundamentally satisfied with the direction Abe is taking for Japan, at least on the security related issues. The whole point is burden sharing. I also understand the US frustration with both South Korea and Japan even though I have to underline this frustration has been existing for 50 years.

Even though I understand US concerns, the most important point for me, no matter the excuses and the reason, is the following question: does it make sense for the US to encourage Japan and South Korea to devote more resources to a defense buildup? In a sense, of course, since if you look at the North Korean threat, we need more Aegis ships, Global Hawks, etc. But ultimately, the real question is whether these new policies will trigger an arm race in East Asia. And unfortunately, I believe it has already begun.

Because the US is saying it can't handle that defense burden by itself, the US is indirectly asking Japan to shoulder more burden sharing which gives Abe the excuse he needed. As a consequence, Japan's policies alarm the Chinese and provide them with the excuse they needed to invest billions in arm buildup.

Moreover, North Korea continues to develop weapons of mass destruction, providing the Japanese with a second excuse even though for the Japanese, ultimately, it is all about containing China. The Chinese are well aware of it and face the Japanese in the East China Sea. I am afraid a real arm race may have already started.

Things are going the wrong direction. If we just look independently at the SMA, I agree with the US complaint that the American taxpayer should not pay that much. South Korean and Japanese should do more for their own defense. However, if you look at the bigger picture, it may not be the direction the US wants to see the region take. It is not in the US's interest that regional actors raise their military expenditures. What if Japan starts spending more than 1% of its huge GDP on defense? With this kind of money, it can build some really, really powerful

⁵ On the US transfer of the wartime operational control (OPCON) and the recently signed Special Measures Agreement (SMA), see: Perrine Fruchart-Ramond, « L'accord sur le financement de la présence américaine dans la Péninsule, révélateur des ambiguïtés de l'alliance », *Korea Analysis*, n° 2, Asia Centre, mars 2014.

weapons. What do you think the Chinese will do as a direct consequence? They will devote more resources to their defense budget, when they spend so far only 2% of their GDP, and it is an even bigger economy. How many aircraft carriers and aegis ships, nuclear submarines and missiles will these two countries produce? We just don't want to see that happen since it would force South Korea to follow them.

I understand the immediate US budgetary constraints and the US's frustration. But if the Americans look at the bigger picture, they need to look for the reason why peace and stability has been maintained in East Asia for so long, and why Asian economies have been so strong, thus benefiting all partners. It's all because the US provided Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and even China with security guarantees. Indeed, the US provided Mao with the security guarantees China needed against the USSR. It's thanks to these guarantees that Deng Xiaoping could embark on its reform and opening up policy. We don't want anything to mess up this incredible balance that the United States has created. We should not let these bilateral issues blind the United States. Washington should maintain the regional strategic balance they have been able to maintain so far.

Antoine Bondaz: *What about the issue of the 123 agreement with the USA⁶ ? Vice-President Choi Kang told me earlier that it was a personal issue for President Park to sign this agreement. Do you see any links with the SMA? Is not it a symbol of South Korea's limited sovereignty as a member of the ROKUS alliance?*

This issue certainly started out as a scientific, technical and even economic issue since we have devoted so much of our energy into developing a nuclear civil industry. For the scientists and the engineers who have been supporting and building up this incredibly competitive industry, the logical conclusion would be to complete the fuel cycle, which will provide us with the state of the art technology regarding reprocessing, enrichment, etc. I would call it science nationalism. It's about nationalism but in a very special fashion: are our scientists as good and competitive as the others? It's not about building nuclear weapons.

However, when people start injecting strategic implications into this issue, things get very complicated. But eventually, we will not have control of the US decision. The US has to look at the bigger picture. It has to consider that if it agrees with South Korea's request, it may create a precedent. It's much more than a bilateral issue.

I don't know how it will be sorted out. What I think is that for President Park, it may be a personal issue, just like it was for her father. President Park Chung-hee did not want to build arms, he wanted to build the economy and he thought technology and science was the key. That's the reason why he sent his daughter, Park Geun-Hye, to study electrical engineering.

⁶ The U.S.-ROK 123 Agreement of 1972 (revised 1974) expiring in March 2014 is the current bilateral civil nuclear cooperation agreement between the United States and South Korea. Negotiations for renewing it have started in August 2010. On the debate whether South Korea should develop its own military nuclear program: Antoine Bondaz, « La Corée du Sud doit elle aussi se nucléariser ? », *Korea Analysis*, Asia Centre, No.1, janvier 2014

Antoine Bondaz: In polls, including these provided by the Asan Institute of Policy Studies, more than 90% of the Koreans support the ROKUS alliance. What are the main problems within the alliance today? What is the public perception of the alliance?

There are a couple of things that damage the alliance, even though I don't really see these issues as great dangers. First, the OPCON transfer you mentioned is probably an issue that will be debated. Here again, it's not quite clear in which direction we will go, whether the left will completely support it and the right oppose it. Second, there is the 123 agreement, but I am not quite sure that the whole issue will affect negatively the alliance, even though the US refuses to sign it. Overall, I think the USA is playing very carefully. The US now knows how sensitive the South Korean public opinion is. It's not like in 2002.⁷ The past ten years have been an incredible learning experience for the USA in trying to read South Korea's public opinion and understand South Korea's politics.

Nonetheless, public perception is very positive. I think the rise of China and of the North Korean nuclear threat have awakened the South Koreans, even those on the progressive side. South Koreans all understand and acknowledge the strategic security necessities of the alliance with the USA. No matter if you think the US is imperial or not, when you perceive to be threatened so directly by China and North Korea, everything else becomes mute.

South Koreans think that Kim Jong-eun is very different to his father. The sense that somehow North Korea will never attack us is softening. Even the left has been inoculated with this national concern. It is quite the same with China. South Koreans don't see China as a peaceful rising cuddling panda anymore, including on the economic side. These immediate concerns are pushing South Korea towards the United States, much more than before. The bigger concern for us is clearly the fear that the US may pull out of the region, weaken and decline.

Antoine Bondaz: Top commander of the US Pacific fleet, Admiral Locklear, stated that "North Korea is the No. 1 security threat in Asia". The day the North Korean threat comes to an end, what will be the future of the ROKUS alliance? Many in China fear that the alliance will remain, just as NATO did in Europe despite the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

That is a great question since that is the question we ask ourselves every day. Unfortunately there is no answer. I guess it will all depend on the process we use to achieve unification, since I assume that this is what you mean when you say the North Korean threat will disappear. It all depends on who South Korea perceives as the country that helps us the most to achieve national unification. Whoever does that will become the darling in our eyes for the decades to come.

Ultimately, I believe Koreans would still want some ties with the USA. Depending on how Japan-China relations also work out, maybe the Japanese and even the Chinese would feel the same too, to have the US standing between them. We can forecast the US continuing presence here in the region.

Many people talked about keeping the US troops south of the 38th parallel and not move them North along the Yalu river. We will have to completely reformulate the justifications for the US troop presence wherever it may be, even if they stay only in the southern part of the peninsula. Short of that, it's going to be very hard to see the South Korean say good bye to the Americans. Unless China says it will grant us with the unification if the American troops leave...

The Chinese are very, very upset, like the Russians. The Soviet Union is gone but NATO is still in Europe. The Soviet Union is gone but bilateral alliances remain in East Asia? The Chinese have a legitimate beef and a legitimate suspicion against the USA and its allies since the alliances are not only being sustained, they are being strengthened. We don't want that suspicion to increase. Somehow, we need to make the Chinese feel that the US presence in the peninsula is stabilizing the whole region. But for the Chinese to feel it, it will depend mostly on the US-China and China-Japan relations.

⁷ The Yangju highway incident occurred on June 13, 2002. A US army vehicle struck and killed two 14-year-old South Korean schoolgirls. The American soldiers involved were found not guilty of negligent homicide, further inflaming anti-American sentiment in the country.