

# FORGING AN ENDURING FOUNDATION FOR U.S.-ROK RELATIONS

by

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This essay poses one basic question: is it values or interests that ultimately determine the strength of a relationship? With the trend toward greater emphasis on democracy, human rights, and other values as the basis of international politics, it could be argued that U.S.-R.O.K. relations are best served by emphasizing their similar values on a number of basic issues. That is, the larger U.S.-R.O.K. relationship will probably endure no matter what policies are taken, simply because the values of the two countries are so similar in so many ways. However, it is still possible that the *security alliance* may come under stress, because it is not clear that the basic interests of the U.S. and South Korea will continue to be in accord with each other.

This tension between values and interests will most likely manifest itself most significantly in the question of whether Japan or China is the most important “structural” factor that affects the alliance. It is probably the conventional wisdom in both Seoul and Washington that the U.S.-Japan-Korea triangle is the most important security relationship in the region. Many observers, when exploring problems and remedies for the U.S.-R.O.K. alliance, have focused on ways to revitalize or build upon the Cold War structures of the U.S.-Japan-Korea alliances. For example, Dan Sneider calls for the alliance to “reassert its vitality as the basis, along with the U.S.-Japan security alliance, of an expanded multilateral structure for Northeast Asia,” while David Steinberg emphasizes “the triangular relations between the U.S., South Korea, and Japan,” which are “in a state of flux.”<sup>1</sup> This perspective takes for granted that these countries will continue to view each other as the closest, most reliable, and important partners.

Indeed, South Korea, Japan, and the U.S. share many similar values: they are all advanced capitalist economies with vibrant democratic polities that share similar viewpoints across a range of social, cultural, economic, and political issues. These three countries – all among the ten largest economies in the world – will be interacting with each other on a wide variety of issues well into the future, and there is widespread agreement among Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington about the importance and content of many of these issues. Furthermore, both Korea and Japan have had over a half century of a highly successful security alliance with the U.S., and it would seem obvious that the building block of long-term regional security would begin with these three countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Sneider, “Re-Imagining the US-ROK Alliance,” p. 4; and David I. Steinberg, “Repairing Seoul’s Tattered Alliance,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* (May 2007), pp. 31-34.

Yet there is another perspective about the future, one that emphasizes interests over values. If interests matter more than values, the future of U.S.-R.O.K. alliance may depend more on how relations evolve with China, rather than Japan. Looking over the horizon from this perspective, it is difficult to imagine a deep U.S.-R.O.K. military alliance, or even smooth and stable relations between the two countries, without both countries arriving at a stable and long-term *modus vivendi* with China.

The U.S.-R.O.K. alliance is still strong, and China has not yet become the regional leader in Northeast Asia, if indeed it ever can. However, in the three decades since China began its economic reforms in 1978, China's influence and importance have clearly increased. In addition, the U.S. has not yet articulated a fundamental long-run strategy toward the region, as reflected in the U.S. debate right now about whether to contain or engage China. This means that if and when the North Korean nuclear issue is resolved, South Korea and the U.S. may not have the same interests in how the region should look, or who should be the leader, or even from where threats arise. As Scott Snyder has noted, "South Korea's greatest vulnerability lies in the fact that it can do little to shape its own strategic environment or to influence the trajectory of the U.S.-China relationship, which ultimately sets the context in which South Korea must make strategic choices."<sup>2</sup>

While most international relations theory – and indeed, most American and Korean policymakers – see the U.S. as the most obvious and benign country with which South Korea should ally, China's proximity and its massive size mean that South Korea can no longer ignore China. Historically, it has been Chinese weakness that led to chaos in East Asia. When China was strong and stable, order has been preserved. Thus, it is not clear that a rising power such as China is destabilizing for the region. The picture of East Asia that emerges is one in which China, by virtue of geography, power, and identity, is becoming the core state in East Asia. This is not even a concern for the future, because China is already a factor today. Chinese economic growth could end tomorrow and China would still be a major economic and political force in the region.

Furthermore, rather than feeling threatened by Chinese growth, there is some evidence that South Korea and China share similar policy orientations on some short-run issues – such as the best way to solve the North Korean nuclear problem – as well as a South Korean willingness to adjust to China's increased presence. In a survey of National Assembly members in 2004, the newspaper *Donga Ilbo* found that 55 percent of newly elected members chose China as the most important target of South Korea's future diplomacy, while 42 percent of "old-timers" chose China.<sup>3</sup> Jae-ho Chung notes that "despite the formidable threat that China may pose for Korea, no trace of concern for South Korea's security is evident in Seoul."<sup>4</sup> South Korea's 2004 National Security Strategy calls the Sino-R.O.K. relationship a "comprehensive cooperative partnership," and calls for greater military

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<sup>2</sup> Scott Snyder, "Between Ally and Partner: Korea-China Relations and the United States," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (April 2007), pp. 64-66.

<sup>3</sup> *Donga Ilbo*, April 19, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Jae-ho Chung, "The 'Rise' of China and Its Impact on South Korea's Strategic Soul-Searching," in James Lister, ed., *The Newly Emerging Asian Order and the Korean Peninsula* (Washington, D.C.: Korea Economic Institute, 2005), p. 4.

exchanges between the two countries.<sup>5</sup> In 2006, a senior South Korean government official said that, “China has no intention of threatening the Korean peninsula. China wants stability on its borders, and it has very good relations with us. We are also deeply intertwined on economic issues as well as cooperating on security issues.”<sup>6</sup> South Korea also trades more with China than it does with either Japan or the U.S. Finally, both China and South Korea share a deep skepticism about Japanese foreign policy and motives, even while the U.S. seems to be drawing ever closer to Japan.

Thus, if at some point the U.S. does decide to move from its current accommodation or “hedge” strategy to outright balancing against China, a key question will be whether the R.O.K. will join a containment coalition in East Asia. The answer to this question is not obvious. If East Asian nations do not balance China as realists expect, an American attempt to construct a coalition to contain China using East Asian states will be highly problematic. That is, in all likelihood, most East Asian states will be extremely reluctant to choose sides. As a respected scholar wrote just before taking a position in the U.S. government in 2006, “U.S. policies designed to slow China’s economic growth or isolate Beijing diplomatically in the region...would undercut the U.S. diplomatic position with everyone else in the region, including U.S. allies.”<sup>7</sup>

That many East Asian states will be reluctant to choose the U.S. does not imply that South Korea will “bandwagon” with China. Such stark alignment into clear spheres of influence is a relic of the Cold War. Today, attempting to characterize East Asia as clear friends (and by extension, “non-friends”) obfuscates more than it illuminates. Thus, despite sharing many interests, China and South Korea also have numerous areas where their interests diverge: they disagree on the importance of the ancient state of Koguryo, they are engaged in nascent competition for influence in North Korea, and of concern to Seoul is the rapidity with which China is catching up to Korea’s technological lead in manufacturing.<sup>8</sup> It is quite possible that South Korean views of China would shift if China becomes more aggressive in the region. Important to note, however, is that the key question is how Chinese and South Korean *interests* will evolve in the future, not their values. From the vantage point of 2007, it appears that although their values may well be different, if their interests remain aligned or even avoid direct confrontation, stability in Chinese-R.O.K. relations is possible.

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<sup>5</sup> National Security Council, Peace, Prosperity, and National Security: National Security Strategy of the Republic of Korea (Seoul: National Security Council, 2004) ([http://www.korea.net/kois/pds/pdf/policy/security\\_en.pdf](http://www.korea.net/kois/pds/pdf/policy/security_en.pdf)).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with author, March 17, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Christensen, “Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster?”, p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> The Koguryo dispute does not, however, appear likely to have any substantive effect on relations between the two countries, in part because the dispute is not a function of official Chinese government policy but rather is limited to unofficial claims made by Chinese academics. China and North Korea formally delineated their border in 1962, with China ceding 60% of the disputed territory. In contrast to South Korea’s territorial dispute with Japan (over which the two have never signed a treaty), the dispute over Koguryo is restricted to claims about history, and at no time has the Chinese government made any attempt to abrogate the 1962 treaty or to re-negotiate the actual border. See Taylor Fravel, “Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation: Explaining China’s Compromises in Territorial Disputes,” *International Security* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 46–83.

Thus, the central foreign policy issue for Seoul and Washington in the future appears to be a question of whether China or Japan is the most critical structural factor affecting the alliance.

In an optimistic scenario where China and the U.S. manage their relations well, Seoul will have more freedom to retain warm relations with both Washington and Beijing, and to strengthen the U.S.-R.O.K. alliance. Current U.S. policy is to engage China and urge it to become a “responsible stakeholder,” in the region.<sup>9</sup> Note that although the concept of responsible stakeholder contains both value and interest connotations, if the Chinese can credibly signal that their goals are benign, many observers will probably be willing to put off the question of Chinese identity and values far into the future. Chinese behavior during the Six Party Talks, for example, has been seen as one indicator that it may be becoming a prudent force in the region. Should this continue, and should the U.S. manage to keep its relations with China at least cordial, the prospects for managing the U.S.-R.O.K. alliance are fairly bright.

Under a pessimistic scenario, however, the U.S. and China may begin to slide into more confrontation. In that instance, Seoul will find itself in an exceptionally difficult situation, one which could very well rupture the alliance. Especially if the U.S. binds its East Asian foreign policy to Japan while the rest of East Asia leans more toward China, South Korea would be in the most difficult position of any East Asian country. For now, Seoul has managed to avoid confronting this difficult issue by “choosing not to decide.” Indeed, policymakers in Seoul would probably like to avoid ever having to make a stark choice between the U.S. and China. Unfortunately, Seoul may not have that luxury.

In sum, East Asia is a different region than it was a generation ago. The U.S.-South Korea relationship is one of the most important in the region, and the two countries share numerous strengths, interests, and values. But forging an enduring alliance will require resolving a central issue – how to adjust the security alliance and the larger relationship into one that also creates a stable relationship with China. It is possible for the U.S. and South Korea to have strong relations with each other and with China and Japan, but in order to do so, both the U.S. and South Korea will have to adjust their policies and their expectations.

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<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Deputy Secretary Zoellick Statement on Conclusion of the Second U.S.-China Senior Dialogue,” December 8, 2005 (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/57822.htm>).