

REALIGNING EXPECTATIONS  
FOR THE ROK-U.S. RELATIONSHIP:  
ARE WE IGNORING A GLASS MORE THAN HALF FULL?

by

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*High Expectations*

The strength of a security alliance depends on how much each partner believes the alliance's benefits outweigh its costs. If each believes benefits outweigh costs and if domestic distribution of costs and benefits is supportable politically, the alliance will likely be favored and endure. Conversely, if costs predominate for either partner, joint interests may diverge and the alliance can be dissolved. In particular, when mutual expectations are too high or unbalanced, costs could prevail over benefits, thereby threatening the *raison d'être* of the alliance. In the case of uncertainty, expectation is considered most likely. An expectation, which is a belief that is centered on the future, may or may not be realistic. A less advantageous result gives rise to the emotion of disappointment. If something happens that is not at all expected, it is a surprise.

Reflecting the current status of the ROK-U.S. relationship, we tend to be curious about what each ally expects toward the other and to what extent each side is able to meet the other's expectations. For two to three years after 9-11, the United States had "high" expectations that its allies would share the same amount of threat perception against terrorism and weapons of mass destruction (WMD). In the 2004 survey conducted by Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR), almost half (44%) of U.S. respondents supported the United States using military force to destroy North Korea's nuclear weapons capability even when the United Nations, U.S. allies, and South Korea all opposed military actions. On the other hand, only 9% of South Korean respondents supported it. This means that many Americans had high expectations, but realized that they did not share the same WMD threat perception with their allies and that the U.S. would have to act alone unless its allies joined the U.S. However, the perceived U.S. shift toward acting on its own has undermined the strength of some alliances and caused a backlash in key countries. In South Korea, that perception has added to the ever-present fear that Washington will sacrifice

Seoul’s interests for its own.

On the other hand, South Korea expected the United States to treat her as an equal partner in light of “reduced” threat from North Korea. The June 2000 inter-Korean summit raised expectations of the South Korean people that the two Koreas could surmount their problems without U.S. involvement. The inter-Korean summit also sparked intensive debate in South Korea on whether reduced tension on the Korean Peninsula was compatible with the ROK-U.S. alliance. South Korea’s rising nationalism and/or anti-American sentiment—abetted by a stellar acquittal in the 2002 World Cup soccer games and a series of United States Forces in Korea (USFK)-related incidents—gave rise to demands for more “reciprocal and equitable” ROK-U.S. ties. At his inaugural speech in February 25, 2003, ROK President Roh Moo-hyun promised, “I will see to it that the ROK-U.S. alliance matures into a more reciprocal and equitable relationship.”

After the second nuclear crisis broke out, the Roh Moo-hyun government explored making progress in the North Korean nuclear problem through its active support for the U.S. war on terror. When the Roh government dispatched its troops to Iraq in early 2004, it expected that the United States would “soften” its policy toward North Korea by talking to the North directly. This kind of “linkage strategy” was not well received by the United States, however. The Bush administration “delinked” the North Korean nuclear problem from the issue of Iraq, thereby disappointing the Roh government. With few Americans aware that more than 3,000 ROK troops were staying in Iraq, the Roh government appeared to feel that the costs of the alliance outweighed the benefits.

**[Table 1] Sour Korean views on a U.S. preemptive military strike against NK**

If North Korea continues to accumulate nuclear materials although it has not actually turned them into a nuclear bomb (%)	If North Korea tries to sell nuclear materials to other countries and/or terrorists (%)	If North Korea tests nuclear bombs (%)	If North Korea test-fires long-range ballistic missiles that can reach the U.S. territories (%)	If North Korea’s attack on South Korea is imminent (%)	If the North Korean regime continuously violates human rights in a gross and systemic manner (%)	I do not approve U.S. preemptive strike against North Korea under any circumstances (%)	Total (%)
6	15	20	13	--	7	39	100

(Source: CCFR Survey, July 2004)

Against this backdrop, some South Koreans have contended that North Korea's nuclear weapons, if they exist, would target rivals such as the United States or Japan, not Southern "brethren," a view Pyongyang encourages through propaganda crafted to drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington. This kind of nationalistic feeling has permeated a view that the United States should not conduct a preemptive military strike against North Korea under any circumstances (39%: See Table 1). More surprisingly, South Korean elites—academics (43%) and politicians (71%)—showed a higher disapproval rate (50%) against preemptive attacks.<sup>1</sup>

### *Realigning Expectations*

#### *North Korea Policy*

In 2004, South Koreans no longer regarded North Korea as a threat. The percentage (49%) of those who believed North Korea would be beneficial to South Korean security was higher than those (41%) who did not think so. In the 2006 CCFR (now renamed as CCGA) survey, however, only 21% of the South Korean respondents believed North Korea is beneficial to South Korean security, while 77% believe the United States is beneficial. This "dramatic" change might be attributable to the period of the survey—from June 19 to July 7 of 2006—which overlapped with the date of North Korea's missile test, or July 4. But, it appears to be true that the South Korean people's perception of North Korea is gradually changing.<sup>2</sup> This may influence mutual expectations between Seoul and Washington regarding the North Korea policy.

From the perspective of the Roh Moo-hyun government, the Bush administration's perceived interest in fostering Pyongyang's collapse or in using military force to resolve the nuclear issue is unacceptable. Both would threaten the lives of the South Korean people as well as the economic and political progress made over the past three decades. Magnified by other tensions in the relationship—anti-American sentiment and concerns about the United States acting on its own—this perception of the Bush approach to North Korea has become the prism through which South Koreans view the security

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<sup>1</sup> CCFR conducted another survey in October 2004 among 250 South Korean academics and 114 politicians.

<sup>2</sup> The "Defense White Paper 2006," that was released in 29 December 2006, defined North Korea as "grave threat" to the security of South Korea, citing North Korea's increasing efforts to reinforce its arsenal of WMD.

relationship. This accounts for the view among many that the plan to redeploy the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division away from the DMZ is a prelude to a U.S. attack on Pyongyang.

Perceptions have begun to shift. It appears to Americans that President Roh more clearly understands the need to at least have in reserve the possibility of tougher measures and to Koreans that President Bush is committed to a peaceful resolution. However, differences still remain. And exactly how these differences affect the alliance will depend on the outcome of current efforts to deal with North Korea.

Granted, a substantial portion of the South Korean population still harbors a highly skeptical view of Pyongyang. But even conservatives are concerned about U.S. policies that have seemed to emphasize tough measures to the detriment of a peaceful solution. A well-managed process of negotiation—which will require shifts on the part of Seoul and Washington—would have positive benefits for the alliance. The worst outcome for the alliance, however, would be a worsening crisis and the perception that the United States is at fault.

In this light, policy priorities are different between Washington and Seoul even if they share the common goal of denuclearizing North Korea. On the one hand, Washington expects the ROK-U.S. alliance to be the most important tool for resolving the North Korean nuclear problem. Only after the nuclear problem is resolved, can we uncover the variety of conditions for establishing a permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula. Seoul expects, on the other hand, that the discussions about as well as the actions for a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula may be useful to resolving the nuclear problem. In this vein, Washington's policy priorities consist of the ROK-U.S. alliance on the top, the North Korean nuclear problem in the middle, and the Korean peace regime at the bottom. But, Seoul's priorities are in the reverse order.

### *Regional Context of the Alliance*

South Korean public opinion has been somewhat divided with respect to the future of the U.S. military presence. The 2004 CCFR survey showed that 51% of the population expected the USFK would continue to stay, while 49% wanted to see it withdraw. This trend still continues in 2006. Nevertheless, the ROK people believe that the USFK contributes to regional stability (59.1%).

The ROK people appear to be supportive of a U.S. military presence after Korean reunification if the number of forces is significantly reduced. Should the

threat from the North disappear, the existing ROK-U.S. military alliance must become part of an expanded regional security alliance to avert rivalry between China and Japan and secure safe sea lanes between Northeast Asia and the Middle East, the route of energy transfers for Korea, China, and Japan. Regional instability would threaten both ROK and U.S. interests, though the United States has historically been perceived as the benefactor, providing Korea with security services. In such a regional security alliance, Korea would assume a higher profile as the host for U.S. forces essential to both U.S. and regional stability. The 2004 and 2006 survey results confirm the fact that the ROK people believe the USFK should become a regional stabilizer (See Table 2).

**[Table 2] : Role of USFK**

		Become a regional stabilizer	Confine to the prevention of military conflict in the Korean peninsula	Not sure/ Decline	Total
		(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
<u>Year</u> 2006	<u>Country</u> South Korea n=1000	60	40	--	100
<u>Year</u> 2004	<u>Country</u> South Korea n=1024	59.4	39.3	1.2	100

(CCGA 2006)

The United States will likely favor such a new form of the alliance in Northeast Asia that retains bilateral ties with Korea but refocuses them from checking the North to a broader regional security network for stability throughout the region. This would effectively harmonize Washington's global strategy with Seoul's national strategy. Of considerable importance to regional security is that any ROK-U.S. alliance would prevent interference from China on the peninsula as Korean unification proceeds. Similarly, Japan needs to be kept in check through the Japan-U.S. alliance.

**ROK-U.S. vs Japan-U.S. Alliance**

The withdrawal of U.S. forces in Korea will increase the potential for tension between Korea and Japan, thereby facilitating Korea's move to draw near to China. The U.S. presence in both Japan and Korea plays an important role in dampening the potential for tension arising between the two countries. But, if

Korea is left alone with the U.S.-Japan alliance remaining, Korea will inevitably choose an alignment with China while witnessing rising anti-Japanese and American sentiment within its own society.

In addition, the withdrawal of U.S. forces in Korea would gradually strengthen feeling in Japan that it should cease to serve as a host country for the U.S. military presence because Japan, which will have probably become a "normal state" with military capability at that point, needs to prepare for a happy divorce with the United States. Opposing voices in Japan toward the U.S. military presence will be stronger, thereby endangering the U.S. presence even in Japan. This is not the scenario that China wants to see, since Japan without a U.S. security umbrella means that Japan will embark on rapid military build-up. USFK and USFJ should thus be treated as a single basket. For now, however, it seems that the U.S. believes Japan will continue to host the U.S. military presence even after the U.S. has left Korea since Japan is in need of U.S. assistance to become a normal state in the international security arena. In this vein, mutual expectations between Seoul and Washington toward ROK-U.S. and Japan-U.S. alliances appear to be unbalanced.

Nevertheless, the United States is being seen by the ROK to be rather indifferent to bridging those two alliances. The United States should make its utmost effort to integrate those two alliances into a "virtual" trilateral alliance. In the security arena, many countries in Asia are skeptical of Japan's expanding role, which is mainly attributable to Japan's "problem of memory" before and during the World War II.

### *Dealing with the China Factor*

In terms of cultural affinity, South Korea-China relations are closer than South Korea-U.S. relations. Korea was once under Chinese influence for more than 1,000 years, compared to just 100 years or so in the case of the United States. There have also been pro-Chinese calls to replace the United States with China as Korea's key alliance partner. Many Koreans see China as less "foreign" than the United States or Russia, and thus a more acceptable and natural strategic partner. As inter-Korean relations continue to improve, South Korea and the United States will have to address the China factor more forthrightly.

The term "Korean triangle" refers to the traditional relationship South Korea has faced being sandwiched between China to the west and Japan to the east, similar in some respect to Poland's position in Europe. In the case of Korea, the

country has had to fend off territorial encroachment by China and Japan for centuries. Indeed, the actual battlefield of the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) was not in China or Japan but on the Korean peninsula. Korea is not in a position, therefore, in which it can easily distance itself from the hegemonic rivalry between these two countries at the exclusion of one or the other. Nor is Korea capable of maintaining a balance of power between China and Japan.

It is not desirable, however, for Korea to form an alliance with one of these two countries. In the absence of a multilateral security arrangement similar to that which exists in Europe, a triangular relationship involving Korea, China, and the United States in Northeast Asia would offer hope and opportunity to Korea. When Korea's diplomatic efforts are conducted along the boundaries of such an arrangement, it would be able to distance itself from any competition between China and Japan. U.S. participation in this triangular relationship would signify Washington's active involvement in regional affairs, which would enhance Korea's diplomatic flexibility.

### *Aiming for the Future*

Are we ignoring the glass more than half full? The jury is still out. The ROK and the United States should thus design a vision for the bilateral alliance. It is necessary to balance mutual expectations and to prepare for the future. The ROK-U.S. alliance faces new post-Cold War and soon post-unification challenges that cause Korea to prefer that a more "equal and reciprocal" relationship replace the "patron-client" one. This requires Seoul to advocate an unprecedented "comprehensive ROK-U.S. alliance" that comprises traditional and human security cooperation lest surrounding countries view ongoing U.S. military support as a threat rather than deterrent. Such a reconfigured ROK-U.S. alliance will preserve, though change, Korea's "unique" stature among other alliances the United States forges.