

Changing Korean Perceptions of the Post-Cold War Era and the U.S.-ROK Alliance

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S U M M A R Y For half a century the United States and South Korea have been united in an alliance that has simultaneously contained North Korea and projected American power into Northeast Asia. Now that alliance is being questioned by many South Koreans, whose country has developed from a poor, authoritarian state into the world's 11th largest economy and a vital democracy. Along the way South Koreans' views of themselves and of other nations have changed. Improved relations with China and Russia, and a policy of engagement with North Korea, have reduced the country's dependence on the United States and South Koreans' tolerance for what they view as American arrogance and unilateralism. Indeed, Koreans today view their Cold War allies (the United States and Japan) more negatively than their Cold War enemies (North Korea and China), a situation that would have been unimaginable a decade ago. The poorly coordinated North Korea policy of Seoul and Washington appears to be a direct cause of anti-Americanism, which will grow unless the two countries develop a more equal, mutually acceptable relationship.

Since democratization, public opinion is an important consideration in foreign policymaking

Old Alliance, New Realities

The U.S.–South Korea alliance, largely successful for half a century, is increasingly being challenged. Since the end of the Cold War, Northeast Asia has undergone profound change and the lines between Cold War friends and foes have blurred.ⁱ South Koreans have achieved phenomenal economic growth and successful democratization, which have in turn altered their perceptions of their nation and the international environment and brought about a great shift in their attitude toward relations with the United States and North Korea. Differences between the United States and South Korea over their North Korea policies not only threaten to sever ties between the two allies, but also complicate the solution to the North Korean problem.

The U.S.–South Korea alliance is a product of the Cold War. South Korea's foreign policy maintained rigid ideological lines, following U.S. security measures. South Korea accepted American dominance because its survival depended on U.S. military and economic support. But recent economic success and the move toward democracy changed Koreans' perceptions of not only their nation but other nations as well. In the mid-1990s, South Korea became the 11th largest economy in the world and gave a few billion dollars in assistance to the former Soviet Union, whose GNP remains about 70 percent of South Korea's. It also joined the OECD, the "club" of developed nations. Improved relations with China and Russia and the Kim Dae Jung government's sunshine policy of engagement with North Korea have significantly reduced South Korea's security and economic dependence on the United States.

As a result, South Korea's foreign policymaking is much more complex. Six "actors" play a role in

determining Seoul's foreign policy: the four major powers (the United States, Japan, China, and Russia), North Korea, and the South Korean people. Since democratization, public opinion is an important consideration in policymaking, complicating the management of foreign relations, including the U.S.–South Korea alliance. The new political milieu gives South Koreans the power to challenge their country's traditional security doctrine.

Throughout, the basic structure of the U.S.–South Korea alliance has remained intact. Despite South Korea's new strategic environment, the United States has maintained its "security-first" Korea policy, even strengthening it after the September 11 terrorist attacks. But South Koreans' perception of a reduced North Korean threat has weakened their tolerance for American arrogance and unilateralism. In addition, Washington and Seoul seem to have very different assessments of the threat and lack a common strategy for the alliance's future. The management of South Korean–American relations and the North Korean crisis are intertwined and both are equally urgent.

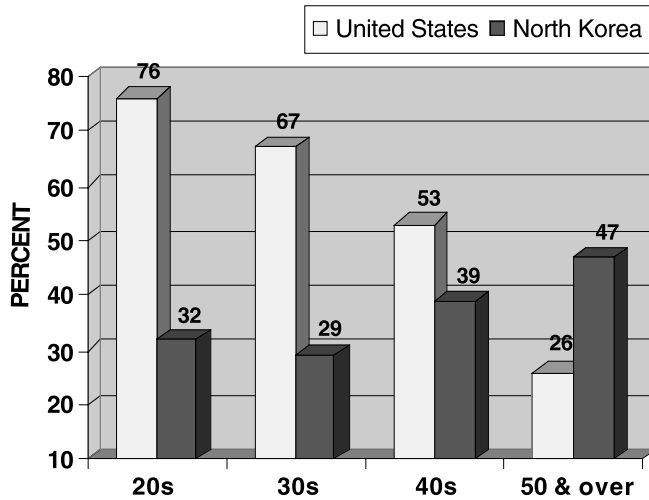
Rising Anti-American Sentiment

Anti-American sentiment is rising rapidly in Korea and could potentially jeopardize the future of the South Korea–U.S. alliance.ⁱⁱ A former Korean foreign minister has commented that "anti-Americanism may reach a point where events could become uncontrollable."ⁱⁱⁱ Before discussing the recent causes of anti-Americanism in Korea, it is useful to examine South Koreans' perception of neighboring countries. The data in Table 1 come from a recent national survey in which respondents were asked whether they had positive or negative feelings toward the major powers and North Korea.

Table 1. Koreans' Image of Neighboring Countries (%)

	US	Japan	Russia	China	North Korea
Positive	37.2	30.3	36.7	55.0	47.4
DK	9.1	11.1	39.2	21.4	15.6
Negative	53.7	58.6	24.1	23.6	37.0

Source: Gallup Korea Survey of 1,054 adults (December 2002).



Source: Gallup Korea Survey (December 2002).

Fig. 1. Negative attitudes toward the United States and North Korea by generation

The results are astonishing and would have been unimaginable only a decade ago. South Korea's Cold War allies (the United States and Japan) were perceived more negatively than its Cold War enemies (North Korea and China). More than 53% of South Koreans surveyed said they dislike the United States, up from 15% in 1994. Over the same period, the percentage of those who said they liked Americans fell from nearly 64% to 37%. The poll numbers also reveal a striking generational difference (see Figure 1). While only 26% of the respondents ages 50 and over expressed dislike for the United States, the rate for those in their twenties was over 75%. A significant generational divide also exists in attitudes toward North Korea. In the same survey, 47% percent of older South Koreans had negative attitudes toward North Korea; only 32% percent of the younger generation felt similarly.

The survey asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea (see Table 2). About 54% disagreed and 32% agreed. These figures again reveal a sizeable generational gap. While 68% of the respondents ages 50 and over disagreed with an American withdrawal, only 42% of those in their twenties did.

We find similar generational differences in a survey of 1,000 adults in June 2002 jointly conducted by the *Monthly Chosun* and a survey company called

Table 2. Should U.S. Troops Be Withdrawn from Korea (%)?

	Agree	Disagree	DK/NA
All	31.7	54.8	13.6
50 & over	13.4	67.6	19.1
20s	47.2	42.4	10.4

Source: Gallup Korea Survey (December 2002).

Open Society. The question was asked: Should the National Security Law, which was promulgated to protect South Korea from Communism and the repeal of which has been one of North Korea's repeated demands, be abolished? As many as 47.5% of respondents in their twenties agreed, twice the number of those 50 and over. On the question of whether North Korea is part of an "axis of evil," 45.5% of older respondents agreed while only 23.6% of the post-Cold War generation did so. Despite President Kim Dae Jung's consistently positive remarks about North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, South Koreans' image of him remained very negative; only 14% of the South Koreans had positive view of Kim Jong Il and there is no generational difference. (We should keep in mind, however, that South Koreans differentiate the people of North Korea from their country's regime.) As these surveys clearly show, South Korean support for the alliance with the United States has declined. According to the report of a Korean daily in May 2002, only 56% of the respondents wanted to maintain the alliance—a figure substantially down from 89% in 1999.^{iv}

The reasons behind the recent rise in anti-Americanism are complex, ranging from the end of the Cold War, demographic change, and increasing Korean confidence, to the mistakes of both the Korean and American governments. Korea has been dominated by foreign powers through much of its history; Koreans harbor deep feelings of anger and resentment at the wrongs done to them in the past. The United States is often seen as one of the causes of this resentment. From the beginning, the management of the U.S.–ROK alliance has not been easy because the United States, a powerful and wealthy country

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Post-Korean War generations make up 80% of the population and have grown resentful of Washington's influence

with little interest in Korea, was seen in stark contrast to Korea, a relatively weak and poor nation in need of American assistance. In the past, Koreans accepted this unequal relationship, but those who have grown up knowing prosperity and democracy no longer tolerate such a relationship. With the end of the Cold War, China and Russia are no longer viewed as South Korea's enemies, and North Korea has become strategically isolated and economically weak. Post-Korean War generations, who make up 80% of the current population, have grown resentful of Washington's influence over their country. They are ashamed of Korea's military dependence on the United States and have come to understand that the United States acts solely in its own interests when dealing with Korea. After the 1997 financial crisis, Korea's vulnerability and fear of foreign influence increased. Globalization, "cultural hegemony," and foreign direct investment (the purchase of Korean companies whose values fell after the financial crisis) are all seen as the negative result of American influence.

The poorly coordinated North Korea policy of both Seoul and Washington appears to be a direct cause of anti-Americanism. Kim Dae Jung's sunshine policy was not based on bipartisan or public consensus. Kim himself was accused of acting for political gain when he announced the Pyongyang summit three days before the April 2000 elections. The opposition party and millions of its supporters were stunned by the announcement and immediately began criticizing the policy. Upon his return from Pyongyang, Kim declared: "We should all regard the North as our compatriot.... There will no longer be war." From then on Kim and his government created the illusion of possible early unification.^v According to a Gallup Korea survey conducted in February 2003, only 37% of the respondents believe the possibility of a North Korean invasion, significantly down from 69% in 1992.^{vi} When the South and the North are truly reconciled, many South Koreans wonder why North Korea is regarded as a threat and question the role of the United States in creating this perception. North Korea is now viewed as an isolated and weak nation. Since the unexpectedly friendly gesture of Kim Jong Il during the 2000 inter-Korean summit, the post-Korean

War generations have begun to see North Koreans as poor brothers and sisters in need of their help.

Although inter-Korean economic cooperation has progressed rapidly, Pyongyang has yet to show any interest in discussing security-related issues. It also has not delivered what it promised Seoul at the 2000 summit. No changes have been made to the "military-first" policy of Pyongyang, and there has been no indication of meaningful economic reform. Millions of older South Koreans who remember the Korean War and the continuous provocations from the North have questioned Pyongyang's intentions and the merit of the sunshine policy. With his legacy at stake, Kim Dae Jung tried to justify his policy by emphasizing the positive aspects of the North Korean regime. This seriously polarized public opinion, forcing South Koreans to choose to be either for unification (and pro-North Korea) or against it (and pro-United States).

Kim's unification-oriented approach conflicted squarely with President George W. Bush's security-oriented North Korea policy. When Kim rushed to Washington in March 2001 to garner Bush's support for his North Korea program, he found Bush very skeptical about the regime in Pyongyang. Kim left feeling humiliated and many Koreans felt the same. Since the September 11 incident, the United States has adopted a new security strategy that incorporates preemptive action against threats involving weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and begun to focus on the North Korean threat.^{vii} The success of the U.S.-led military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq has led to speculation about the next target in the antiterrorist war. Bush designated North Korea as part of an "axis of evil," adding it to a list of nations frequently mentioned as potential targets. For South Koreans, the North Korean threat is nothing new: it is 50 years old and its nuclear threat has continued for more than a decade. Thus, the American perception of North Korea differs greatly from that of many South Koreans today and has caused an ever-widening chasm to develop between South Korea and the United States.

The coexistence of the Cold War and the post-Cold War has been the source of great confusion for

South Korea in its relations with the United States. Pro-unification groups believe that the United States is undermining inter-Korean reconciliation and unification and is responsible for the continued partition of the peninsula. Some radical groups have declared: “There is no task more urgent than the reunification of the Korean nation,” and “the greatest obstacles to unification are the United States and its politics of strength.”^{viii} Since the end of the Korean War, North Korea has consistently demanded the withdrawal of American forces from South Korea and made this a part of its unification strategy: now it seems North Korea has successfully driven a wedge between Seoul and Washington.

Reflecting public opinion, government officials and members of the ruling party openly criticized Bush and blamed him for the slow progress of inter-Korean reconciliation. Bush’s hawkish attitude toward Pyongyang has caused deep disagreement between pro-unification groups and conservatives in Korea. After a U.S. military vehicle accidentally crushed two young Korean girls in June 2002 and the two soldiers involved were acquitted, resentment against the United States exploded. Taking advantage of the situation, Pyongyang waged a propaganda campaign against the United States as well as South Korean conservatives. The relationship with the United States was a focal point of the South Korean presidential elections in December 2002, culminating in a flood of anti-American campaign rhetoric, which misled and misinformed many Koreans. But it must be noted that the anti-Americanism in South Korea reflects mostly anti-Bush government sentiment. Koreans also want a relationship with the United States on a more equal, mutually acceptable basis.

South Korea and Emerging Regionalism

The significant changes we now see in South Korea’s foreign relations would have been inconceivable in the late 1980s. The new international environment has freed South Korea from the diplomatic constraints of the Cold War system; it has developed better relations with China and Russia; and it is embracing the Northeast Asian regionalism that has emerged as a

result of globalization. Nations in the region are exploring common agendas and a vision for the future of their part of the world. They share the view that peace and stability on the Korean peninsula are essential for regional prosperity. For this reason and others, Korea’s neighbors support the sunshine policy.

China has done very well for itself in the post-Cold War era. Relaxed security, encouraging a more liberal economy and society, and globalization have accelerated world trade with and investments in China. For both China and South Korea, geographical proximity and cultural affinity make trade and investment ties not only convenient but also desirable. China is the new frontier for the Korean economy: it is South Korea’s second largest export market after the United States and replaced Japan as Korea’s major business partner.^{ix} Bilateral trade between China and Korea was up from \$3 billion in 1991 to more than \$30 billion in 2001; social, cultural, and political ties have also grown robustly. For China, South Korea is its fourth largest foreign investor and an attractive partner because Korea’s intermediate technology is suited to its needs. Psychologically and culturally, South Koreans feel confident about China, where South Korea is perceived as a wealthy and developed country. They no longer see China as a Communist adversary blindly supporting North Korea. The sunshine policy has received Chinese support, and Sino-South Korea relations are closer today than they have been at any other time. Some Koreans have argued that better relations with China will encourage North Korea to be more receptive to overtures from the South. If anything, closer ties with China will make it more difficult for China to take North Korea’s side in a dispute.

Since diplomatic normalization with Seoul, Russia’s policy toward the Korean peninsula has altered dramatically. Moscow, once a major supplier of military hardware to Pyongyang, nullified its security treaty with the North and now sells most of its advanced military equipment and technology to Seoul. In addition, the sunshine policy has provided Russia with an opportunity to develop natural resources in the Russian Far East with the possible extension of the Trans-Siberian Railroad into the Korean peninsula.

Sino-South Korean relations are closer today than they have been at any other time

Russia's posture toward the peninsula is attractive to South Koreans because it may help inter-Korean reconciliation. To increase its leverage with Washington and Seoul, Moscow has tried to restore its relations with Pyongyang.

The role of the United States in the region is also changing. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the global balance has shifted decisively in America's favor and it now has a wider range of strategic choices. The strategic security of South Korea is no longer of vital interest to the United States. The only fundamental U.S. concern on the peninsula is that North Korea should not be allowed to threaten the U.S. homeland with its WMD—and that North Korea should not be permitted to sell such weapons. One wonders whether Washington has any post-Cold War policy that Seoul would support. Given the lack of a common vision, enormous geographical distance, cultural and ethnic differences, and the emerging regionalism in Northeast Asia, the United States seems even further removed from Korea than it was during the Cold War.

To many Koreans, Japan's performance in the nineties was not very impressive. The country suffered a long-term economic recession, its image as one of the economic superpowers was greatly compromised, and against the tide of globalization, it has become more nationalistic. The rapid development of information technology in South Korea has significantly reduced its economic and technological dependence on Japan. Fortunately, however, Japan has done much to better its bilateral and trilateral relations with South Korea and China. South Korea–Japan security cooperation has developed substantially since the early 1990s. Cohosting the 2002 World Cup provided a great impetus to improving South Korea–Japan cooperation. Tokyo has also been trying to engage with North Korea: Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's September 2002 visit to Pyongyang added momentum to Kim Dae Jung's engagement policy with the North.

The development of Sino–South Korea relations is being watched closely by Tokyo and Washington, where some speculate that a unified Korea may ally with China. Although South Korea's links to former

Cold War adversaries have caused Seoul's ties with Washington and Tokyo to shrink, it is unlikely that Chinese influence will supersede that of the United States or Japan in the foreseeable future. For South Korea, better relations with China are a natural and fortunate development and economic cooperation among South Korea, Japan, and China serves the interests of both the region and the United States.

Toward a Mature and Reliable Partnership

The inauguration of President Roh Moo Hyun offers a significant challenge to the Bush administration, which has been trying to increase diplomatic pressure on North Korea to discard its nuclear program. Roh's election is seen by Koreans as a victory for anti-Americanism and unconditional engagement with North Korea. Roh has repeatedly emphasized his support for the sunshine policy and equality in relations with the United States. His vision of Korea's future is based on Northeast Asian cooperation and prosperity through inter-Korean reconciliation. He is the first Korean president whose way of thinking was not forged in the Korean War. In the past he has called for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Korea.

At a time when U.S. perceptions of a North Korean threat are growing, President Roh has argued that sanctions and the use of force against the North are totally unacceptable. Although the United States favors a peaceful resolution to the nuclear issue, Washington has refused to rule out air strikes. The absence of a military option reduces Washington's bargaining power, leaving few options other than complete capitulation to Pyongyang's demands or acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear state.

Future talks between Washington and Pyongyang will be tough and demanding and the outcome highly uncertain. To reach any agreement, there must first be a thorough inspection of North Korea's weapons program, which Pyongyang will see as a threat to its sovereignty. In return, Washington may have to provide security guarantees to the North, including a nonaggression treaty, which would undermine South Korean security interests by leaving Seoul out of the peacemaking process and calling for the withdrawal

Rob is the first Korean president whose way of thinking was not forged in the Korean War

of American forces from the South. Pyongyang's priority is the survival of its regime, which depends on military strength, including WMD. While tens of thousands of people are dying from starvation in the North, Pyongyang devotes as much as 20–25% of its GNP to military spending.^x The familiar North Korean tactics of brinkmanship may lead to a serious confrontation. Both Washington and Seoul will find it far more difficult to manage their bilateral relations should issues concerning the North's aggressive nuclear weapons program remain unresolved.

Seoul needs to be a reliable player in the international community and, at the same time, a mature partner for Washington, a role commensurate with its international status. As far as the Korean peninsula is concerned, it should be ready to take the lead. With the help of bipartisan and public support, Seoul should carefully prepare mid- and long-term foreign, security, and unification strategies and coordinate them closely with those of the United States, thus avoiding U.S. unilateralism. In adopting a strategy for the region, establishing priorities is terribly important: the resolution of the North Korean crisis is urgent; the development of an equal partnership with the United States is secondary. Seoul also needs to calm anti-Americanism, which has emboldened the North's Kim Jong Il in his confrontations with the United States. The North Korean crisis demands more detailed planning and closer cooperation between Seoul and Washington than ever before.

Despite the many post-Cold War developments in East Asia, U.S. policy in the region has not changed noticeably. As the only superpower, the United States tends to be less sensitive to the difficulties and problems of other countries. It has not made an effort to understand the world because the world has primarily come to it. As a result, U.S. foreign policy is seen as unilateral and heavy-handed. In dealing with Korea, Washington needs to pay more attention to issues important to Koreans and to treat South Korea as a key partner in East Asia. Both Seoul and Washington should be prepared to act prudently on the dual issues of establishing a peace regime on the peninsula and redefining the future role of U.S. forces in Korea. The U.S. government needs to better understand

Koreans' dream of reunification and to accommodate this hope in its policy toward the North and South. In Korea, it is an article of faith that the United States is to blame for the division of the peninsula and thus has a special responsibility to help restore national unity.

As Washington emphasized recently, a multilateral approach to the North Korean issue is the most desirable. (Considering the complex security situation on and around the peninsula, a unilateral approach would be risky and impractical.) The Four-Party Talks (among North and South Korea, the United States, and China) were abandoned after the Pyongyang summit and the transition from presidents Clinton to Bush. If dialogue had continued, Korea and the United States would be in better agreement concerning North Korea and the United States would have been blamed less for undercutting attempts at inter-Korean reconciliation. Careful coordination of policy toward North Korea by the United States, the Republic of Korea, and Japan is essential. In conjunction with the negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang, a six-party dialogue deserves thorough consideration, expanding the Four-Party Talks to include Japan and Russia.

The war on Iraq has provided some incentives to resolve the North Korean crisis peacefully.^{xi} Although the South Korean people have been largely critical of the U.S.-led war, the South Korean government has tried to maintain the alliance relationship by dispatching non-combat troops to the Middle East. As a result, U.S.–South Korea relations have recently improved noticeably. Seeing itself as a possible next U.S. target after Iraq and witnessing the formidable American military might, Pyongyang did not escalate tension on the peninsula. Thus, in late May 2003 in Beijing, the United States, North Korea, and China will begin the multilateral dialogue which Pyongyang had long rejected.^{xii}

As a rising power surrounded by not-so-friendly giants, South Korea is in a delicate situation. Balancing traditional allies and new friends requires much skill and thought. Northeast Asia and the Korean peninsula in particular would be less stable without an American military presence, and a significant change in the security environment on the peninsula would

Resolving the North Korean crisis is urgent; developing an equal U.S.–ROK partnership is secondary

Seoul and Washington should consider establishing a joint commission to review their relationship

have a devastating effect on the Korean economy. South Korea is of tremendous value to the United States, not only because of its strong economy, but also because of its democratic institutions, military bases, and armed forces, which can aid the United States in regional and global missions. In light of recent events, Washington and Seoul would do well to

conduct a complete review and readjustment of all aspects of their security relationship. Since it is manifestly in the interests of both, the two governments should consider establishing a joint commission responsible for reviewing the bilateral relationship and recommending measures the two governments could take to support it.

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