

**JOINT U.S. – KOREA ACADEMIC STUDIES**

**Volume 15, 2005**

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**The Newly Emerging Asian Order and  
the Korean Peninsula**

**Symposium Sponsored by  
The College of William and Mary  
The Korea Economic Institute, and  
The Korea Institute for International Economic Policy  
August 25–27, 2004**

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## **THE RISE OF CHINA AND SOUTH KOREA**

*Robert Sutter\**

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## I. Introduction

Converging trends appear to be posing an important decision point for South Korean leaders in 2004. Recent wide differences between the United States and South Korea have prompted South Korea to move away from past dependent relations with the United States and adopt more assertive and independent postures in alliance relations and a broader foreign policy, including policy toward China. This process is driven by multiple factors that involve generational change in South Korea—older South Koreans with pro-U.S. views from the Korean War and Cold War periods are being replaced by younger Koreans who emphasize disputes and differences with the United States. Differences between the two allies are growing over several issues:

- Asymmetrical alliance relations that are resented by many in South Korea;
- U.S. decision making on key issues involving North Korea;
- Deployment of U.S. forces in Korea and from Korea that appears arrogant and cavalier to many in South Korea; and
- Strong U.S.–South Korean divergence over the perceived threat posed by North Korea and the appropriate policies for dealing with this threat.

Meanwhile, China's rise in Asia and its particular importance to nearby countries, notably South Korea, have significantly affected South Korea's foreign policy orientation. The positives in recent Sino–South Korean relations clearly outweigh the negatives in the minds of broad ranges of South Korean leaders and public opinion. According to South Korean decision makers and others, closer ties with China have come to provide an alternative to the past dependent South Korean relationship with the United States. As a result, South Korean leaders are called to decide how to position the South Korean government in relations with the long-standing U.S. ally and the burgeoning Chinese neighbor. The choices are many and varied, and it is doubtful that South Korea, preferring to seek advantage in relations with both of these powers, will signal a clear stance any time soon.

This paper focuses on the recent China–South Korea relationship. It first explains the recent overall foreign policy framework of Chinese leaders in order to clarify the relative importance of the United States, South Korea, and others in the Chinese leaders' calculus. It then assesses in more detail China's recent relations with South Korea over bilateral issues; Korean peninsula issues, notably relations with North Korea; and broader foreign policy concerns. It then offers a brief overview of findings of interviews and consultations conducted by the author in May–June 2004 with South Korean officials and elites regarding South Korean relations with and attitudes toward

China. It concludes with the judgment that improved Chinese–South Korean relations likely will continue to grow despite various differences; these improved relations will add to U.S.–South Korean differences and will influence South Korean decision makers to pursue a less U.S.-centric approach to foreign affairs.

## **II. China's Recent Foreign Policy Framework—A Peaceful Rise**

Beginning in 2003, Chinese leaders began a new stage in China's efforts to define China's approach toward its neighboring countries, including South Korea. Premier Wen Jiabao addressed the topic of China's "peaceful rise" in a speech in New York on 9 December 2003 (MOFA 2003; Zheng 2003, 2004). Despite such high-level pronouncements, the exact purpose and scope of the new emphasis on China's peaceful rise remained less than clear to Chinese and foreign specialists.<sup>1</sup> Consultations in May 2004 with 50 Chinese officials and nongovernment specialists closely involved in this issue helped to clarify the state of play in Chinese decision-making circles regarding China's peaceful rise and what it means for China's approach to South Korea and the rest of Asia.

### ***Genesis of the Peaceful Rise***

In Asian and world affairs, the Chinese approach builds on the moderation and flexibility shown in Chinese foreign policy in recent years. According to senior party strategists and other officials, Chinese leaders reviewed the negative experiences of China's past confrontations with neighbors and other powers and the negative experiences of earlier rising powers such as Germany and Japan in the twentieth century to conclude that China cannot reach its goals of economic modernization and development through confrontation and conflict. As a result, China's leaders incorporated the moderate features of China's recent approach to Asia and the world into their broader definition of China's peaceful rise.

Thus, China was expected to become even more active in economic, political, and security interaction with nearby countries, including South Korea, attempting to reassure them that China's rise is not a threat to their interests. China will pursue mutually beneficial economic schemes that will assist the economic rise of China's neighbors as well as China. Such win-win approaches also will be applied to political and security issues. Chinese participation in various regional and global multilateral organizations will advance, allowing China to become more fully integrated into the prevailing regional

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1. This assessment is based heavily on consultations with Chinese officials and specialists during a research trip to Beijing and Shanghai in May 2004.

and global order and, in the process, permitting Chinese officials to interact more closely in moderate and flexible ways with neighboring governments and concerned powers.

A central feature of the Chinese approach is a very clear and carefully balanced recognition of the power and influence of the United States. In the post–Cold War period, the Chinese leadership often worked against and confronted U.S. power and influence in world affairs. China resisted the U.S.-superpower-led world order, seeking a multipolar world of several powers in which China would enjoy more influence and room for maneuver. In recent years, Chinese leaders reevaluated this approach. Adopting a more pragmatic attitude to the continued unipolar world led by the United States, they acknowledged and gave more prominence to the fact that U.S. power and U.S. influence actually serve many important Chinese interests. For example, U.S. power guarantees the sea lanes of communication so important for oil imports coming to China, helps maintain stability on the Korean peninsula, and provides important leadership in the war on terrorism.

Greater pragmatism and a strong desire to offset views in the United States that saw a rising China as a competitor and a threat prompted Chinese leaders and officials to narrow sharply their view of areas of difference with the United States. Most differences with the United States now seem to center on the Taiwan issue and continued U.S. support for Taiwan. The wide range of other Chinese complaints about U.S. “hegemonism” in the post–Cold War period was reduced.

In this improved atmosphere, Chinese leaders sought to build closer ties with the United States. They wished to integrate China more closely in the Asian and world system, which they saw as likely to continue to be dominated by U.S. power for many years to come. They pursued closer partnership with the U.S. leaders on Korean and other issues, and they wanted to avoid taking steps that would cause the U.S. leaders to see China as a danger or a threat that would warrant concerted U.S. resistance to Chinese development and ambitions. At the same time, they were not abandoning their past differences with U.S. hegemonism. They still disapproved of perceived U.S. domination and unilateralism seen in U.S. practices in Iraq, U.S. missile defense programs, U.S. strengthening alliance relations with Japan, NATO expansion, and other areas that were staples in the repertoire of Chinese criticism of U.S. post–Cold War practices. But Chinese officials were not prepared to raise such issues as significant problems in U.S.-China relations unless they impinged directly on core Chinese interests. As a result, most important Chinese criticism of U.S. policy tended to focus on issues related to disputes over Taiwan.

### ***Issues of Debate and Concern over China's Peaceful Rise***

Consultations with Chinese officials and specialists concerned with the process of defining the purpose and scope of China's peaceful rise showed several areas of concern and debate. Inside China, the new approach was not well understood. The decision to articulate this new approach, with its remarkably moderate and pragmatic approach toward the United States and China's neighbors, was done at high levels. It was said to be subject to continued debate within the leadership. Some Chinese specialists advised that China could revert to a harder approach if the current moderate stance is seen as not working effectively for Chinese interests. They warned that Chinese hard-liners could reemerge under some circumstances.

Meanwhile middle- and lower-level specialists who were taken by surprise by the moderation seen in the recent Chinese foreign policy approach adjusted and followed the party line, but there was great uncertainty about broader public opinion in China that remained closer to a more hard-edged Chinese posture toward the United States and other powers, notably Japan, that were perceived as working against Chinese national interests.

In addition to issues inside China, Chinese specialists also saw complications and issues for China's peaceful-rise approach posed by forces outside China. In general, specialists expressed concern that the viability of the new peaceful approach depended greatly on the reaction of concerned powers and developments in sensitive areas. Heading the list was Taiwan, where President Chen Shui-bian's strongly assertive posture toward redefining Taiwan's legal status through constitutional revision elicited Chinese warnings of war. Chinese officials expected the United States to take a direct role in curbing President Chen's pro-independence leanings. They were pleased with U.S. statements warning Chen not to disrupt the status quo, but they were skeptical that such moves would be enough. They pressed for curbs in U.S. military support for the Taiwan leader. This issue—a core concern for Chinese leaders—underlined Chinese worry that their peaceful-rise approach would not elicit appropriate U.S. responses. Continued strong U.S. opposition to Chinese interests on Taiwan could prompt a Chinese reevaluation of the viability of the recent peaceful approach, they averred.

Japan posed a special impediment to China's approach to Asia. Unlike in the case of the United States, Chinese leaders did not mute most differences with Japan. Though media coverage of differences in Sino-Japanese relations was less than in the 1990s, it was much more prevalent than in the case of the United States. Reasons offered by Chinese specialists included the Japanese prime minister's continued visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, Japan's refusal to acknowledge past aggression in ways acceptable to China, and domestic politics in both Japan and China. In general, Chinese specialists recognized that continued friction in China-Japan relations complicated the

attractiveness of China's peaceful-rise strategy in Asia, but they were pessimistic that there would be any diminishment of such differences in the near future.

Though China was seen to have had considerable success in improving relations with South Korea and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), some Chinese specialists were concerned about the reactions of Russia and India to China's rise. Although Chinese relations with both Russia and India were good, some observers felt Moscow and New Delhi were maneuvering with the United States, Japan, and other countries on specific issues to insure that their power and influence relative to China was not seriously diminished as a result of China's rise. Such perceived balancing of China was said to be a secondary concern to Chinese officials although it represented an adverse trend that worked against Chinese interests in Asia.

Because of its perceived power and influence, the United States loomed large in Chinese specialists' calculation of possible problems for China's peaceful-rise approach. In general, the success or failure of the Chinese initiative depended on the reaction of the United States. If U.S. policy turned from the recent trend of seeking convergence with China and resumed an approach of viewing China as a strategic competitor, observers thought that Chinese leaders would likely reevaluate their foreign policy and adopt a more confrontational posture in return. This was seen as especially likely if U.S. hardening affected Chinese interest in Taiwan.

Chinese specialists duly acknowledged that there remained broad segments of U.S. opinion and interest groups disposed to be negative and suspicious of China and its policies (USCC 2002, DOD 2003). Many U.S. groups had participated actively in the vocal debates over U.S.-China policy after the Cold War and saw a wide range of continuing differences between China and the United States over political, economic, security, and other issues. In the view of these Americans, U.S.-China relations remained the most complicated and contentious U.S. bilateral relationship after the Cold War. The major shift in U.S. strategic attention to the war on terrorism and the conflicts in Iraq and Southwest Asia distracted attention from China but had not ended suspicion and wariness by many Americans.

These Americans were not inclined to accept without careful verification Chinese assurances of peaceful intent. The Chinese peaceful-rise approach played down Chinese negative treatment and criticism of the United States on most issues, with the notable exception of Taiwan, but this did not necessarily assuage U.S. critics of China. For example, U.S. security planners and related specialists in intelligence and other departments in the U.S. government and supporting nongovernment agencies had been compelled to devote extensive and continuing attention to potential or real threats from China. This came particularly in response to the Chinese military buildup after the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995–96 and the accompanying stream of rhetoric and

articles by Chinese strategists and other commentators pointing to China's willingness and ability to resort to various means of asymmetrical warfare in order to defeat U.S. forces should they intervene in a Taiwan contingency. As a result, the willingness of these U.S. government and nongovernment specialists to take at face value Chinese assertions that peaceful intent in 2003–04 was balanced by the specialists' continued awareness that Chinese military forces continued to add sophisticated capabilities to People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces targeted at Taiwan and at U.S. forces that would intervene in a Taiwan contingency. Without explicitly addressing China's military doctrine, force structure, and increased military capabilities, China's new, peaceful approach to the United States and others was not very meaningful to these Americans. They judged it was hard for the United States to be a true partner of a country that continued to develop and expand military capabilities targeted at Americans.

### **III. China's Approach toward South Korea**

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of East-West and Sino-Soviet competition for influence on the Korean peninsula after the Cold War, Beijing adjusted Chinese relations to take advantage of economic and other opportunities with South Korea while it sustained its position as North Korea's most important foreign ally. The international confrontation caused by North Korea's nuclear weapons program and related ballistic missile programs, and the sharp decline in economic conditions and the rise of political uncertainty in the North following the sudden death of Kim Il-sung in 1994 raised uncertainties in China about the future stability of the peninsula. In general, Chinese officials used economic aid and continued military and political exchanges to help stabilize and preserve Chinese relations with the North, while they worked closely with South Korea and at times the United States to seek a peaceful resolution to tensions on the peninsula. In response to the crisis created by North Korea's provocative nuclear proliferation activities during 2002–04, China was even more active, taking the lead in international efforts to seek a diplomatic solution that would preserve China's influence and interests on the peninsula (Kim S. 2001, 371–408; Shambaugh 2003, 43–56; Roy 2004; Chung 2003–04, 549–68; Liu 2003, 347–73; Ji 2004; Kim S. 2003, 39–56; Scobell 2002, 278–9; McVadon 2001, 134–5).

South Korean officials along with U.S. and other outside observers often judged that China has a longer-term interest in seeing a growth of Chinese influence and a reduction of U.S. and Japanese influence on the peninsula (Kim T. 2001, 205–6; Roy 2004; Wang F. 1997). However, Beijing was careful not to be seen directly challenging U.S. leadership in Korean affairs; Beijing apparently judged that Chinese interests were best met with a broadly accommodating posture that allowed for concurrent improvements in China's relations with South Korea and effective management of China's sometimes difficult relations with North Korea. The net result was a marked

increase in China's relations with South Korea and continued Chinese relations with North Korea closer than any other power's but without negatively affecting Beijing's relations with the United States. During the 2002–04 crisis over North Korea's nuclear program, China's cooperation with the United States, South Korea, and other concerned powers in seeking a negotiated solution to the problem enhanced the overall positive development in China's relations with these countries while it managed tensions over the North Korean program in ways that avoided conflict or instability on the peninsula.

### ***Relations with South Korea***

In the post–Cold War period, China's active interest in beneficial economic relations with South Korea continued to grow, and Chinese and South Korean leaders took a variety of initiatives to markedly improve their overall bilateral relations. Top leaders on both sides repeatedly exchanged visits in a warm and cordial atmosphere. Both sides demonstrated similar motives: increased bilateral contacts for economic reasons, enhancement of their interests on the Korean peninsula, and broadened foreign policy options. The positions of Chinese and South Korean leaders remained close in reaction to the North Korean nuclear crisis that began in 2002. The improved relations kept in check differences that emerged over how to deal with North Korean migrants seeking refuge in China and some trade and territorial issues.

Among other significant China–South Korea exchanges, well over one million South Koreans traveled annually as tourists to China while somewhat fewer than half that number of Chinese tourists visited South Korea each year. Overall, South Korean visits to China in 2002 amounted to 1.7 million. Of South Koreans who traveled abroad, one-quarter had gone to China by 2003. In 2001, South Korea for the first time received more Chinese visitors (440,000) than visitors from the United States. Chinese tourists to South Korea grew to more than 500,000 in 2002. In 2001, more than 16,000 South Koreans were studying in China; in 2002, the number was 24,000; and numbers as high as 40,000 were seen for 2003–04. Also, by 2001, the number of flights between South Korea and China exceeded the number of flights between South Korea and Japan. In 2004, the number of South Korea–China flights was roughly 200 per week. The trend gained momentum as more flights leaving Seoul's new international airport went to China than to Japan (Snyder 2002).

Economic and other contacts continued to go hand in hand with political contacts. Seoul played a key role in negotiating the participation of China, along with Hong Kong and Taiwan, as full members in the third meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Seoul in November 1991. Such exchanges paved the way to China's decision in August 1992 to normalize diplomatic relations with South Korea despite North Korea's objections. President Kim Dae-jung of South Korea

played an important role in developing the ASEAN + 3 multilateral forum and encouraging China's active participation in the group since the late 1990s.

At the official level, with the October 2000 visit of Premier Zhu Rongji to Seoul, all seven members of the Chinese Communist Party's ruling Standing Committee had visited South Korea. Military exchanges and cooperation grew more slowly, presumably on account of China's reluctance to antagonize North Korea. However, the South Korean defense minister visited China in August 1999 for the first ROK-PRC defense ministerial talks, the Chinese defense minister visited Seoul in January 2000, and exchanges grew in ensuing years (Snyder 2000b, 2001a).

These remarkable developments resulted in a continuing shift of South Korean perceptions of China, which South Koreans now saw as a benign and pragmatic economic partner (Kim T. 2001, 205–6). A 1996 poll conducted by the ROK government found that 47 percent of South Koreans chose China as Korea's "closest partner for the year 2006" while 24 percent chose the United States. A media-sponsored survey in 2000 found that 52 percent of South Korean respondents predicted China would be the most influential Asian power in 10 years; few chose the United States (Kim S. 2003, 39).

### ***Korean Peninsula Issues***

In the 1990s, closer relations with China helped to ease South Korean concerns about Beijing's possible support for North Korean aggression against the South. Closer China relations also provided Seoul, via Beijing, with an indirect channel of information on and communication with North Korean leaders, who at that time generally refused to interact directly with their South Korean counterparts (Sutter 1997, 2). Chinese officials viewed improved relations with South Korea as broadening China's influence on the peninsula (Niksich 2003; Sutter 2000, 99).

Chinese officials took pains to emphasize that the improvement in China's relations with South Korea in the 1990s was not directed in any way at the United States or the U.S.–South Korean alliance relationship. Despite the fact that the Chinese government in the 1990s officially encouraged the eventual U.S. military withdrawal from East Asia and strongly criticized the strengthening of the U.S.–Japan alliance relationship, Beijing officials were moderate in response to calls in the United States and South Korea at that time for a continued U.S. military presence in Korea even after Korean reunification (Sutter 2000, 101; Glaser and Montaperto 1998, 111–2).

China strongly supported international efforts to improve relations with Pyongyang at the time of the North Korean–South Korean summit of 2000 and in line with South Korean President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy toward the North. Strong Chinese

political support for inter-Korean reconciliation was welcomed by the Kim Dae-jung government at a time of difficulty in U.S.–South Korean relations stemming from the George W. Bush administration's harder line compared with the policy of the Clinton administration toward the North Korean regime (Snyder 2000a, 2001b).

China's stature with the North increased in 2000–01, notably as a result of Kim Jong-il's two visits to China and Jiang Zemin's visit to North Korea. While Beijing encouraged economic reform and increased international outreach by the North, Beijing also urged the United States and others to support the asymmetrical accommodation seen in Kim Dae-jung's engagement policy and avoid confrontation and increased tensions. Beijing did not make major issues of its differences with the United States over the Bush administration's tougher posture toward the North, although it was critical of U.S. strengthening of alliances in Asia (mainly with Japan) and U.S. missile defense plans focused on the North Korean threat (Snyder 2001b).

During the North Korean nuclear crisis of 2002–04, rising tensions prompted by the combination of North Korea's provocative nuclear weapons development, shrill warnings, and assertive military actions as well as the firm determination of the United States not to be blackmailed by Pyongyang caused Chinese officials to respond to U.S. requests to take a more active role in seeking a solution to the crisis. The Chinese government adopted a more active stance; hosted the three-party talks<sup>2</sup> in Beijing in April 2003 and six-party talks<sup>3</sup> in Beijing in October 2003 and in 2004; and engaged in several rounds of shuttle diplomacy with the United States, North Korea, South Korea, and other concerned powers. Though unhappy to be excluded from the three-party talks in April 2003, South Korea supported China's efforts to seek a negotiated solution and was pleased to join in the six-party meetings, pushed by the United States, in October 2003 and 2004 (Roy 2004; Ji 2004; Liu 2003, 347–73; Kim S. 2003, 39–56).

The international crisis of 2002–04 caused by North Korea's provocative actions in breaking past commitments and pursuing the development of nuclear weapons saw China follow a course closer to South Korea than to the United States. The Bush administration's refusal to be blackmailed by North Korea seemed to preclude significant U.S. compromises on security and aid issues important to North Korea until a verifiable dismantling of North Korea's nuclear program was assured. The South Korean government seemed inclined to favor more U.S. flexibility, and South Korea continued to pursue a flexible approach to North Korea under the leadership of President Roh Moo-hyun, elected in December 2002; it continued various economic and other exchanges with North Korea under the rubric of the asymmetrical

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2. Participants were China, North Korea, and the United States.

3. Participants were China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States.

normalization program set forth in Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy. Both China and South Korea also seemed to agree that escalating diplomatic, economic, or military pressure against North Korea would be counterproductive as it would increase the risk of war on the peninsula (Snyder 2003a).

Chinese officials adopted a low profile on the concurrent crisis in U.S.–South Korean alliance relations beginning in 2002. Widespread popular resentment in South Korea against the Bush administration's hard line against North Korea, asymmetrical features of the U.S.–South Korean alliance relationship, and strongly negative popular reaction to the accidental deaths of two South Korean youths during exercises by U.S. troops in South Korea fed election-year politics and assisted the December 2002 election of Roh Moo-hyun on an anti-U.S. platform. When President Roh took power in February 2003, he backed away from many of his previous positions critical of U.S. policy, but strongly felt resentment against U.S. government policies remained among many in South Korea. Commentators and strategists of this persuasion often urged that South Korea would be better off reducing its strong dependence on the United States and relying more strongly on Seoul's ever closer relationship with China. By adopting a low profile on the South Korean–U.S. controversy, Chinese officials and official commentary were careful not to be seen as seeking to take advantage of the anti-U.S. upsurge in South Korea as a means of driving a wedge between Washington and Seoul (Snyder 2003b, 51–72).

### ***China's Relations with North Korea Relevant to China–South Korea Relations***

Geographic proximity and the prevailing post–Cold War international strategic impasse focused on North Korea and its continued nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs and other provocative military activities meant that most aspects of Chinese relations with North Korea were relevant to Chinese–South Korean relations. The smooth progress and rapid development of China's relations with South Korea have contrasted sharply with the more difficult Chinese relations with North Korea after the Cold War. Chinese interests in North Korea remained strong (Roy 2004). The late-1980s cutoff of Soviet aid to North Korea and normalization of Soviet–South Korean relations and the early-1990s demise of the Soviet Union reduced Chinese concern over Moscow's influence in North Korea. However, post–Cold War conditions saw North Korea pursue nuclear weapons development, which led to a major crisis with the United States and its allies. The death of Kim Il-sung in 1994 added political uncertainty to the already unstable conditions on account of the collapse of the North Korean economy and widespread famine in the country (Kim S. 2001, 374–84).

Chinese officials provided a large share of North Korea's outside food and energy supplies, but not in amounts that satisfied North Korean officials (Kim S. 2003, 44).

Chinese leaders repeatedly encouraged their North Korean counterparts to follow some of the guidelines of Chinese economic reforms and to open more to South Korean and other international economic contacts. North Korean officials seemed reluctant to open the country significantly, presumably fearing that outside contact would undermine the regime's tight political control that has been based on keeping North Koreans unaware of actual conditions abroad. North Korea did endeavor to carry out some domestic economic reforms and open some restricted zones for foreign trade, tourism, and gambling. A proposed zone planned for an area next to the Chinese border in northwestern North Korea did not meet with China's approval, and the Chinese government in 2002 arrested on corruption charges the China-born entrepreneur who was selected by North Korean leaders to direct the foreign economic zone (Liu 2003, 370–2).

Chinese diplomacy in North Korea–South Korea–U.S. relations and particularly regarding the crises prompted by North Korea's nuclear weapons program emphasized preserving stability on the Korean peninsula. Chinese frustration with North Korea's nuclear weapons program and other provocations was deep and serious, particularly as the North Korean actions could provoke a U.S. attack and the spread of nuclear weapons to Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and elsewhere. At the same time, Chinese leaders showed keen awareness that major instability in or collapse of the North Korean regime would have potentially major adverse consequences for China. Consequences include a danger of full-scale war on the Korean peninsula, large-scale refugee flows to China (already an estimated 200,000–300,000 North Korean refugees resided in China in 2003), and the possible establishment of a unified Korean state under the leadership of a South Korean government that maintains a close military alliance with the United States (Roy 2004).

Chinese government actions in 2003–04 seemed to strike a balance of support and accommodation of the North Korean regime and sought to avoid the many dangers for key Chinese interests that would follow from major instability or collapse of the North Korean regime. Annual Chinese aid of about 1 million tons of food and supplies of energy of about 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil continued with President Hu Jintao offering increased aid to Korean leader Kim Jong-il in order to entice North Korea to participate in the six-party talks in Beijing in October 2003 (Kim S. 2003, 45–49; Wang J. 2004, 9–12).

In sum, China's policy continued to balance often conflicting imperatives regarding North and South Korea as it dealt with the delicate and potentially volatile situation on the peninsula. Beijing did not appear to seek big changes in the political or military status quo; it appeared intent on promoting as much stability as possible while it benefited economically and in other ways by improving its relations with South Korea. As economic conditions in North Korea deteriorated and as the North Korean regime

persisted with provocative military and other actions, Beijing officials privately worried about possible adverse consequences for China. Nonetheless, Chinese officials still saw their basic interests as well served with a policy of continued, albeit guarded, support for the North along with improved relations with the South and close consultations with the United States over Korean peninsula issues.

The situation for China's relations with North Korea improved for a time with the unexpected breakthrough in North-South relations leading to the Pyongyang summit in June 2000. This event raised hopes in China of eased tensions and peaceful accommodation on the Korean peninsula. China figured importantly in the North-South summit preparation as the site of secret North-South negotiations. Moreover, Kim Jong-il seemed to be seeking Chinese advice and support in the new approach to South Korea as he made two visits to China and as Jiang Zemin visited North Korea. The overall trend in North Korean actions suggested more openness to Chinese advice and greater willingness to adopt policies of *détente* and reform that would reduce the danger of North-South military confrontation, promote economic revival in North Korea, and lower the chances of economic collapse and social instability, including the need for massive Chinese assistance and the large-scale flow of North Korean refugees to China (Snyder 2000a; 2001b).

This hopeful period ended with the impasse in North Korean-U.S. relations following the Bush administration policy review on North Korea in 2001, the sharp rise in tensions on the peninsula posed by North Korea's provocative nuclear weapons development in 2002-03, and signs of strong differences between North Korean and Chinese leaders over reform in North Korea's economy. China was instrumental in persuading North Korea to participate in the three-party and six-party talks in Beijing in 2003-04 that dealt with the nuclear crisis and related issues. Chinese diplomats, endeavoring to find common ground between the positions of North Korea on one side and the United States on the other, were careful not to take sides in the discussions although Chinese positions were close to those of South Korean officials and sought common ground and stressed the need to reduce confrontation, avoid pressure, and preserve peace. In 2004 China showed its support for North Korea in welcoming Kim Jong-il, who again visited China.

Well aware that dealing with North Korea involved unpredictable twists and turns perpetrated mainly by the idiosyncratic dominant leader of this isolated state, Chinese leaders by 2004 appeared resigned to a protracted effort to deal with the North Korean nuclear crisis through diplomatic means. They made known China's continued opposition to other countries putting strong pressure on North Korea, reportedly warning of North Korea using military means to lash out in response to pressure. Continued but less than sufficient Chinese food and energy assistance was a key Chinese source of leverage with North Korean leaders, but Beijing remained hesitant to use its levers—

food, energy, and others—for fear of provoking a sharp North Korean response contrary to Chinese interests of promoting stability on the peninsula.

Chinese officials also worried about U.S. actions, fearing that, as the United States became impatient in the face of North Korea's continued development of nuclear weapons, it might resort to strong political, economic, or military measures. Chinese officials realized that the massive U.S. military effort to stabilize postwar Iraq, along with the U.S. preoccupation with the war on terrorism and other issues, made it unlikely in the short term that the United States would risk confrontation or war on the Korean peninsula by substantially increasing U.S. pressure on North Korea. The situation remained volatile, however, with concern focused especially on the U.S. reaction to or other international fallout from such possible North Korean steps as a nuclear weapons test, a ballistic missile test seemingly targeted against Japan or U.S. forces in Japan, or North Korean nuclear weapons cooperation with international terrorists (Roy 2004; Ji 2004; Kim S. 2003, 51–53).

#### *IV. Foreign Policy Concerns in China–South Korea Relations*

South Korean motives for good relations with China often included foreign policy concerns. At times in the 1990s and later, South Korean officials viewed better relations with China as a useful way to preclude possible Chinese expansion or pressure against South Korea as China grew in wealth and power during the twenty-first century. They also saw good relations with China as providing protection against possible pressure from Japan against South Korea in the future (Sutter 2000, 101). Officials in Seoul were careful to add that relations with China also broadened South Korean foreign policy options, allowing South Korea to appear to break out of the constraints imposed by what they saw as a U.S.-centered foreign policy since the 1950s. South Korean opinion leaders judged that, with better relations with China, Seoul could afford to be more assertive and less accommodating in its relations with the United States (Sutter 1997, 4). Meanwhile, South Korean officials also asserted that South Korea wanted to avoid a situation in which it might have to choose between Washington and Beijing if U.S.-Chinese tensions in Asia were to rise sharply.

According to South Korean experts, China viewed good relations with Seoul as a possible hedge against Japanese power; and Chinese intentions were said by some South Korean experts to reflect a desire to use better relations with South Korea against possible U.S. efforts to contain, or hold back, China's growing power and influence in Asian and world affairs. Chinese specialists and officials voiced concern from time to time that the United States might use its alliance relationships with Japan and South Korea, in particular, in order to check or build a barrier against the allegedly expanding “China threat” in Northeast Asia. Closer China–South Korea relations would complicate any such U.S. strategic scheme (Roy 2004; Wang F. 1997).

In this context, South Korea and China markedly increased cooperation in Asian regional groups (Snyder 2003b, 55–59). China's greater willingness in the 1990s and 2000s to cooperate more closely with and play a more active role in Asian multilateral organizations assisted this trend. Previously, Chinese officials had viewed Asian multilateral groups with more wariness and skepticism. Thus, China's greater willingness to cooperate with South Korea and others in the economic deliberations of APEC and in the security-related interchanges in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) enhanced China–South Korea relations.

The two powers also participated actively in regional forums that exclude the United States. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), initiated in 1996 and meeting biennially, saw both South Korea and China play significant roles that encouraged greater cooperation between East Asia and the developed countries of Europe, in part as a counterweight to the U.S.-led APEC. The Asian economic crisis of 1997 prompted stronger regional cooperation efforts led by South Korea and China under the ASEAN + 3 rubric. This group, including the 10 ASEAN states plus Japan along with China and South Korea, became the paramount regional grouping in East Asia, with frequent meetings of senior ministers and state leaders that occasioned major economic and some political and security initiatives, notably proposals by China, South Korea, Japan, and others for free-trade agreements in the region and security plans dealing with East Asia.

These actions reflected strong interest in China and South Korea in deepening intraregional cooperation, first in economic areas but then in political and security areas, in order to ease long-standing mutual suspicions among East Asian states and enhance prospects for peace and development in the region. China's public stance focused on its New Security Concept (NSC), announced in 1997—a reworking of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence that were the mainstay of moderate and accommodating phases in Chinese foreign policy for 50 years. The NSC was well received in South Korea and, along with other Chinese policies and behavior, provided a vague but sufficient basis for many in South Korea and elsewhere in Asia to deal with China's rising power and influence in constructive ways.

When the NSC was initially proposed, Chinese foreign policy strongly competed with the United States, and Chinese officials repeatedly used the NSC to counter the U.S.-favored alliance structure in Asian and world affairs. Following the moderate turn in China's public posture toward the United States in 2001, Chinese officials and commentary generally avoided calling on South Korean or other Asians to choose between China's NSC and the previously emphasized “Cold War thinking” and “power politics” exemplified by the U.S. insistence on maintaining and strengthening U.S.-led alliance structures in Asia and elsewhere. This more positive Chinese approach, which Chinese officials said will lead to a win-win situation in Asia for all concerned powers

including the United States as well as South Korea and China, was well received in South Korea and helped strengthen Sino–South Korean relations.

## **V. Recent South Korean Views on Relations with China**

Personal consultations in South Korea during May and June 2004 with South Korean government officials concerned with China and with South Korean academic and other specialists who deal with Chinese affairs underlined the increasingly positive assessment in South Korea of China’s approach toward the Korean peninsula.<sup>4</sup> Beijing’s recent emphasis on China’s peaceful rise in Asia was warmly welcomed. South Korean government officials pointed to the discussion of South Korean–Chinese relations in the May 2004 national security strategy of the Republic of Korea (NSC 2004, 61–63). The section of the document dealing with South Korean–Chinese relations was full of positive statements. It highlighted the July 2003 summit between President Roh Moo-hyun and President Hu Jintao, which upgraded the bilateral relationship to a “comprehensive cooperative partnership.” South Korean officials welcomed consolidated relations with China as providing a “firm foundation” for regional cooperation and peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia.

Assessing the very positive trends in bilateral political, economic, military, and other kinds of relations, the summit’s joint statement on 8 July 2003 pledged to increase the already very active exchanges of personnel and political party leaders, to see South Korea play an important role in China’s efforts to develop western China, and to seek a bilateral trade volume of \$ 100 billion by 2008. Both sides also pledged to expand military exchanges and enhance transparency in military policies (NSC 2004, 62).

In the view of South Korean officials in mid-2004, South Korea and China also seemed to have a common general interest in multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia and elsewhere. South Korean government officials noted that they would work hard to promote cooperation with China and others in the United Nations and ASEAN + 3, and that South Korea would seek to work with China to develop multilateral security dialogue in Northeast Asia and Asia more broadly.

South Korean officials judged that China continued to play a critically important role in promoting dialogue for the peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue, and they pledged to work closely with China to speed the process seen in the six-party talks. China’s role in other aspects of inter-Korean cooperation also was seen as centrally important by South Korean officials.

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4. Fifteen South Korean officials and nongovernment China specialists, conversations with the author, Seoul and Busan, May–June 2004. The assessment in this section of South Korean perspectives is based heavily on these consultations.

South Korean government officials and nongovernment specialists believed that China's emphasis in 2003–04 on China's peaceful rise reflected a long-term trend of moderate Chinese behavior in Asian and world affairs. In their view, Chinese leaders were too preoccupied with internal issues and difficulties to consider a more assertive or disruptive posture in Asia. China was seen as being in no position to confront the United States, and Chinese leaders were seen by the South Korean officials and specialists as anxious to avoid confrontation with U.S. power. This overall situation was seen as likely to persist for many years.

South Korean government officials privately were concerned in mid-2004 about what they saw as a "China fever" among large portions of the South Korean people and among many of the recently elected legislators in South Korea's National Assembly. China was becoming more popular among these important groups at a time when tensions in the U.S.–South Korean alliance relationship continued as a result of a variety of bilateral and other issues. The salient issues in U.S.–South Korean alliance relations in mid-2004 had to do with reaching agreement on deployment and reduction of U.S. forces in South Korea in line with an altered U.S. global military strategy that allowed for stationing fewer U.S. soldiers overseas and using those soldiers flexibly in response to a variety of possible contingencies. The United States made a notable decision to remove a combat brigade from South Korea and send it to Iraq in mid-2004 and was said to be unlikely to replace the brigade in South Korea.<sup>5</sup>

South Korean government officials privately said they continued to believe that the United States was far more important for South Korea than was China, and they were concerned about preserving a healthy alliance relationship with the United States despite repeated crises and differences in recent years. Nonetheless, they said they faced a difficult challenge in achieving these tasks in the face of widespread South Korean public opinion—and the opinions of recently elected legislators—that gave China the top priority in South Korean foreign policy and took a dim view of the United States and the U.S.–South Korean alliance. In this context, some officials cited recent polls that showed that, among the members of the National Assembly elected in April 2004, 63 percent saw China as most important for South Korean interests and only 26 percent saw the United States as most important. The officials said this was similar to other polling of popular South Korean views of the United States and China.<sup>6</sup>

South Korean government officials and some nongovernment South Korean specialists also emphasized in 2004 that South Korea more than ever did not want to be in a

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5. U.S. and South Korean officials, consultations with the author, 31 May 2004 and 1 June 2004.

6. South Korean officials, consultations with the author, May–June 2004.

position of having to choose between the United States and China. On one hand, they wanted to preserve and enhance the alliance with the United States. Some averred that the alliance was an important reason China treated South Korea in a very friendly manner. Without the alliance, they judged, China would have less incentive to be so accommodating of South Korean interests and concerns. There was a good deal of publicity in South Korea about the cultural and historical affinities that prompted many in South Korea to see closer alignment with China as a natural and comfortable stance for South Korea. South Korean government officials nonetheless said that they were less sanguine that such an alignment or position within China's "sphere of influence" would be good for South Korea, especially without the counterweight of the South Korean alliance with the United States. On the other hand, however, South Korean officials also acknowledged that there were some South Korean officials who sought to use improved South Korean relations with China as a means of prompting the United States to be more accommodating and forthcoming regarding South Korean issues and concerns.

Reflecting angst over preserving the alliance with the United States while improving relations with China, the South Korean government officials emphasized that the U.S.-ROK alliance should allow for positive U.S. and South Korean relations with China and avoid friction with China. Against this background, South Korean officials noted Seoul's unwillingness to follow the United States in pursuing policies that China opposes, including U.S. efforts to criticize China's human rights practices, U.S. development of ballistic missile defenses, and, most important, U.S. support for Taiwan. It was broadly held among South Korean and U.S. observers in Seoul that one of the main reasons South Korea was reluctant to agree to allow U.S. forces in South Korea to be deployed to other areas was that those forces might be deployed to the Taiwan area in the event of a U.S.-China military confrontation in the Taiwan Strait. Some officials said such a deployment would meet very strong South Korean opposition and prompt a major crisis in the U.S.–South Korean alliance.<sup>7</sup>

Some South Korean officials tried to put the upsurge in positive South Korean attention to China in 2004 in a more balanced context. They judged that the burgeoning economic ties, China's central role in dealing with North Korea, and the very attentive and accommodating Chinese political approach toward South Korea were major reasons why the recent positive trend would continue. China "respects" South Korean pride, they said, noting how important this was for China's good public image in South Korea. At the same time, the officials saw serious issues in China–South Korea relations and advised that South Korean opinion was volatile and could turn against China if a sensitive issue were to emerge. They cited Chinese-Korean differences over the

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7. South Korean government officials, conversations with the author, Seoul, 31 May 2004.

historical range of China and Korean states—a recently prominent dispute among Chinese and Korean historians that had some possible bearing on current territorial claims of the respective governments. Indeed, the issue subsequently became a major dispute, souring Chinese–South Korean relations in the latter part of 2004. Trade issues emerged along with rising trade and prompted anger by some in South Korea. Some South Korean officials claimed that China’s handling of the six-party talks belittled the South Korean role; were this to become widely known, they said, Chinese–South Korean tensions would rise. The Chinese position on North Korea also was seen as at odds with South Korea, especially in the sense that China was seen wanting to preserve the North Korean state as a buffer while Seoul sought reunification.<sup>8</sup>

## **VI. Conclusion and Outlook**

In sum, the broad upswing in China–South Korea relations seems likely to continue. Chinese officials continue to adopt a low profile on issues in U.S.–South Korean alliance relations except if they involve North Korea or possibly Taiwan. Thus, China complained about U.S. efforts perceived as applying pressure on North Korea through joint military exercises with South Korea, and they also complained about the U.S.-backed Proliferation Security Initiative that was seen to target North Korea. South Korean and U.S. officials reported that Chinese officials inquired about how the possible deployment of U.S. forces from South Korea might affect Chinese interests, notably concerning a possible Taiwan contingency.

China’s discretion has been consistent with its overall positive posture toward South Korea, a posture attentive to South Korean sensibilities and pride. China’s current approach does not confront U.S. interests in South Korea directly, but clearly provides a counterpoint for South Korean elite and popular opinion at times of difficulties in U.S.–South Korean alliance relations. Some observers in Seoul in mid-2004 judged that the United States was not in a good position to improve relations with South Korea and that China as a result would loom even more important in South Korea’s future. They noted that while President Roh had moved away from anti-U.S. positions since his election in December 2002, the new legislature and the presidential administration were seen as looking with disfavor at U.S. efforts to downsize U.S. forces in South Korea in order to use those forces in other areas. Goodwill on both the South Korean and U.S. sides have become frayed as a result of many crises and tensions, especially since 2002. Several officials on the U.S. side seemed tired of changing and seemingly unreasonable South Korean demands, and a similar fatigue factor was also seen by some as taking hold of South Korean officials. If recent

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8. South Korean government officials, conversations with the author, Seoul, 31 May 2004.

trends were to continue, China's influence in South Korea could rise to a level where it was indeed the leading partner of South Korea, with the United States relegated to a lower overall position in South Korean thinking. The key variables determining this outcome were U.S. and South Korean policies and behavior more than Chinese policies and behavior.

In conclusion, during 2005 and 2006 the Chinese emphasis on peaceful rise seems generally advantageous for South Korea. Over the longer term, China's approach and the recent negative trends in U.S.–South Korean alliance relations pose major concerns for the United States and, perhaps, for South Korea. While careful not to confront the United States directly or to explicitly exacerbate U.S.–South Korean tensions, China's markedly improved relations with South Korea help to insure that Seoul will be a reluctant participant at best in any possible U.S.-led effort to pressure or constrain China and that the U.S. ability to establish a future order on the Korean peninsula contrary to Chinese interests also will be curbed. The possibility that South Korea will rebuff the United States and seek close alignment with China also appears to grow with each positive step in South Korean–Chinese relations and with each concurrent negative development in U.S.–South Korean ties.

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