

JOINT U.S.-KOREA ACADEMIC STUDIES

Towards Sustainable
Economic & Security
Relations in East Asia:

U.S. AND ROK POLICY OPTIONS



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KOREA'S DOMESTIC BASE FOR ALLIANCE WITH THE UNITED STATES

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I. Introduction

The past decade in the Korea-U.S. alliance relationship has not been smooth. Since the late 1990s, Koreans have been raising issues related to the past or current actions of the U.S. Army, which was unthinkable before democratization. The No Gun Ri massacre of civilian refugees and villagers by U.S. soldiers during the Korean War was reopened and publicized in 1999. Environmental concerns of local residents near the Maehyang-ri military camp drew heavy public protests when an accidental bombing during a drill in May 2000 went unheeded. The firing camp was closed eventually. This was soon followed by another incident in which poisonous material leaked from the Yongsan Garrison to the Han River, drawing strong denunciations from Korean nongovernmental organizations and strengthening the popular pressure to move the Yongsan Garrison from the heart of Seoul. Growing anxiety over social and environmental problems associated with United States Forces Korea (USFK) led to unprecedented candlelight vigils in late 2002 when U.S. GIs involved in the deaths of two middle-school girls during an armored vehicle exercise were acquitted. The resulting public outcry effectively turned the revision of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) into a presidential election campaign issue, as anti-U.S. sentiments intertwined with the heated election politics.

By the time anti-U.S. sentiments subsided, the Pentagon's initiative to realign the Korea-U.S. alliance was launched. Although the move was intended to restructure overseas U.S. troops in line with the new post-September 11, 2001, strategic environment, rising anti-U.S. sentiment in Korean society clearly entered the calculus of realigning USFK. During the critical years between 2003 and 2005, new global strategic postures of the United States and the nationalistic policy tenets of Korea interacted to change the nature of the alliance in a significant way. Eleven meetings of the Future of the Alliance (FOTA) concluded in 2004 with a 10-point agreement that included the early relocation of the Yongsan Garrison and the 2nd U.S. Infantry Division away from the Demilitarized Zone. To ease the security anxiety of Koreans, the United States proposed a plan to invest more than \$11 billion over the next four years to modernize the combined defense. The Korean government responded with a large defense budget increase to bolster its self-defense capability through weaponry modernization and drew up its "cooperative self-reliant defense" policy.

Separate from the relocation negotiations, the U.S. government unilaterally notified Korea of its plan to redeploy some of the USFK to Iraq in May of 2004. Two weeks after this decision, the United States announced a plan to cut the USFK by 12,500 by the end of 2005. The two governments finally agreed in October to reduce the proposed 2008 size of the forces over three stages. Replacing the FOTA, the Security Policy Initiative (SPI) came into effect on 9 February 2005 to discuss the operation of USFK outside the Korean peninsula under the new concept of "strategic flexibility" and the

future vision of the alliance. One major issue concerning the SPI was the transfer of wartime command from the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC) to the Republic of Korea. After some 15 months of official negotiations, both governments finally agreed in February 2007 to transfer the wartime command to Korea on 17 April 2012 and consequently resolve the CFC at the same time.

In retrospect, the transformation of the Korea-U.S. alliance during the Roh Moo-hyun government—involving the USFK's relocation, its reduction, and the return of wartime command to Korea—is a dramatic development considering that all these negotiations were carried out just as the North Korean nuclear crisis was unfolding. While the crisis was being handled within the framework of the six-party talks, the alliance proceeded to transform itself along the two countries' changed but not necessarily shared interests. Subject to the new U.S. global strategy and to Korea's domestic politics, the Korea-U.S. alliance has been marginalized during the past several years.

With the half-century alliance at a crossroad, both Seoul and Washington are searching for a durable basis to sustain the alliance into the foreseeable future. Concerned security experts from both sides are calling for the alliance to be reinvigorated with a new vision and renewed support. To this day, the Korea-U.S. alliance has served successfully the goal of deterring military aggression by North Korea. With the inter-Korean rapprochement, however, the alliance came to require other rationales in order to be sustained. Liberals argue that the alliance can be reshaped as a political alliance promoting common values such as peace and democracy. Realists call for a realignment to take the form of a force to manage regional contingencies. Whichever the future path of the Korea-U.S. alliance, keeping the alliance is a political decision, and domestic support in each country is essential to the sustainability of the alliance. On the basis of such concern, this paper will discuss Korea's domestic base in sustaining the alliance relationship with the United States.

II. Challenge and Opportunity of a New Korea-U.S. Alliance

South Korea Needs the United States as an Ally

Korean security experts recognize the changing conditions of the Korea-U.S. alliance at multiple levels. The East Asia Institute, a Korea-based think tank, has identified four such changes. First, the United States has given top priority to a global strategy of preventing terrorist attacks and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, while aiming to shape a new world order that would help maintain U.S. hegemony. Second, at the regional level, the United States is interested in managing the balance of power in East Asia by simultaneously cooperating with and containing China, while Korea is caught in a dilemma of heeding the interests of both the United States and China

owing to Korea's increasing dependency on China. The third major change is the threat perception gap between the United States and Korea toward North Korea, given the inter-Korea rapprochement of recent years. The fourth changed condition is Korea's changing public opinion toward a horizontal alliance relationship with the United States (Ha 2006).

These multilevel changes are daunting challenges for South Korea, arguably the weaker partner in the alliance relationship with the United States. Most security experts in Korea agree that Korea needs the United States as an alliance partner in the foreseeable future, particularly given that North Korea continues to pose many security challenges. First, North Korea is still a major threat to deter. Although North Korea's hostile behaviors have been somewhat subdued, the country will continue to pose a genuine threat until its nuclear program is completely dismantled and a durable peace regime between two Koreas is securely institutionalized. Second, the uncertain future of North Korea keeps South Korea reliant on U.S. support. Despite the South's wish for North Korea's soft landing, the possibility of a sudden collapse, massive numbers of refugees, or a humanitarian crisis remains too great a burden to resolve by the South alone. The United States is widely expected to play a benevolent role of crisis management because it is geographically too distant to have any territorial ambitions. Third, the United States is beginning to portray itself as a supporter for the reunification of the two Koreas. Leftists in South Korea have long accused the United States of using the presence of USFK to prolong the division of the Korean peninsula. President George W. Bush's Dorasan Station speech clearly rejected that conventional leftist notion. The positive prospect for the normalization of the relationship between the United States and North Korea is expected to give credit to the argument that the United States can play the role of a sponsor in the Korean reunification process, as it did in the German case.

From the perspective of South Korea's interest in maintaining stability in the Northeast Asian region, retaining the alliance with the United States is beneficial. The Roh Moo-hyun government has put forward the realization of the "Northeast Asian era of peace and prosperity" as a major policy goal. The Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Business Hub was created in April 2003 to formulate a comprehensive regional policy and has since changed its name to the Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative. To help create a new order, the initiative adopted three major strategic goals: design a virtuous circle of peace and prosperity by establishing a new order of integration and cooperation, establish peace and prosperity on the Korean peninsula, and strengthen national competitiveness through innovation and reform that is responsive to changes in Northeast Asia. It has defined South Korea's roles as being a "bridge," "hub," and "cooperator" nation. Linkage of security, economic, and sociocultural cooperation on the one hand, and linkage between inter-Korean and

Northeast Asian cooperation on the other hand were emphasized. Both bilateral and multilateral cooperative structures have been called upon to build a regional community.¹

In the process of finding Korea's strategic position in the region, the Roh government couched the Korean role as a "balancer" between China and Japan. China's economic clout has increased so rapidly that maintaining good relations with China and concurrently managing long-standing economic and security ties with Japan had become critical tasks. South Korea came to see its strategic position in Northeast Asia as a balancer between two regional leaders and hence took a greater interest in building subregional institutions in Northeast Asia. The U.S. interest in maintaining a balancer role in the Asia-Pacific region certainly parallels Korea's interest in preventing either China or Japan from claiming exclusive regional hegemony. The U.S. influence in restraining Japan over the history issues and the potentially dangerous Dokdo-Takeshima territorial dispute is one of the key merits of the alliance for South Korea.

The China factor also works in favor of retaining the alliance with the United States: Without security ties with the United States, Korea alone cannot hope to balance China's growing influence. China's expanding interest in the North Korean economy could also become an obstacle to a reunification process. In this vein, Korean strategists have been hoping to lure the United States into engaging North Korea to check Chinese dominance. The alliance would become a burden to South Korea, however, if Korea were to be entangled in a possible U.S.-China conflict. South Korea, obviously, would want to maintain its strategic freedom over the China question while it retains its military alliance with the United States.

In a nutshell, the Korean leadership finds multiple reasons why the country needs to sustain the alliance with the United States. Therefore, President Roh's nationalistic position seeking independence from U.S. influence had to be tempered with an awkwardly termed defense policy of "cooperative self-reliant defense"—expanding the comprehensive alliance relationship with the United States while strengthening South Korea's self-defense capability (National Security Council 2004). Caught between nationalism and pragmatism, President Roh's U.S. policy has been a combination of not easily compatible policies: refusing the U.S. demand to join the Proliferation Strategic Initiative and pushing the transfer of the CFC's wartime command to Korean sovereignty on the one hand, and rushing for the conclusion of a free trade agreement (FTA) with the United States and continuing the dispatch of Korean soldiers to Iraq on the other hand.

1. The bridge nation will link continental and maritime powers to create a new order of cooperation and integration; the hub nation will emerge as the center of ideas for ensuring peace and prosperity in the region and as the hub of inter-regional networks; and the cooperator nation will serve as a catalyst for regional cooperation to build a community of peace and prosperity in the region (Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative 2007).

Regardless of the ideological stance of the new political leadership in South Korea, the alliance relationship with the United States will pose a dilemma as long as the Korean government seeks to maintain a certain degree of strategic freedom from the United States in managing its engagement and enlargement relationship with North Korea and China.

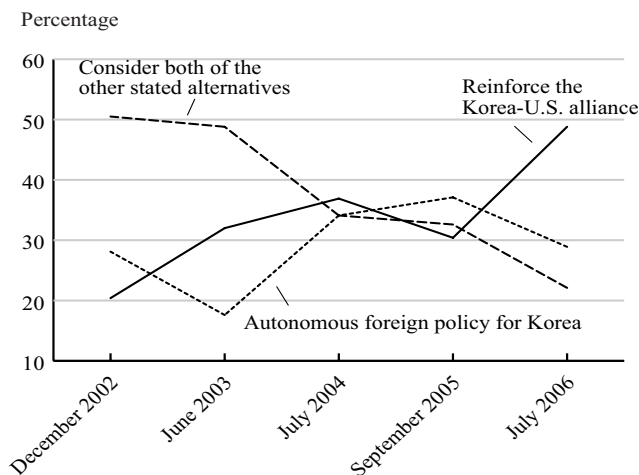
Stabilized but Lukewarm Popular Support for the Alliance

No massive street demonstrations against the United States have taken place since the series of large-scale anti-U.S. protests in 2002. In early 2006, however, the Korea-U.S. FTA negotiations threatened to rekindle those protests and anti-U.S. sentiments as the FTA emerged as a highly controversial national agenda item that captured public attention in Korea. Farmers, vulnerable industries, labor unions, and progressive politicians formed a front to halt the negotiations. Despite vigorous debates and some street protests, however, FTA negotiations with the United States were concluded successfully in April 2007 and were received fundamentally as an economic issue. The opposition was unable to draw sufficient support based on anti-U.S. sentiments. Different economic interests of winners and losers in the FTA deals with the United States made a national coalition of opponents impossible. Beyond the parochial economic calculation of loss and gain, it is certain that the Korea-U.S. FTA has had a stabilizing effect on the shifting attitude among Koreans toward the United States by reaffirming Korea's link to the United States. The FTA, if ratified in both countries, will serve well the sustainability of the Korea-U.S. alliance.

Despite the absence of any critical adversity in the Korea-U.S. alliance relationship, popular support for the alliance in Korean society appears to be too lukewarm to reinvigorate the Korea-U.S. alliance. Koreans tend to have warm feelings toward the United States and its people though not as much as toward European countries. According to both the 2004 and 2006 Global Views polls (CCFR and EAI 2004, 2006), which provide quantitative measures for perceptions toward other nations, Korean feelings toward the United States and its people were measured at 58. That number was similar to views about China and its people—58 and 57 in the same polls. In the 2006 poll, Korean feelings toward England and France were 63 and 60, respectively, noticeably higher than toward the United States.

Public support for the Korea-U.S. alliance has, in fact, stabilized during the past several years. The tragic deaths of two schoolgirls in 2002 and President Roh's anti-U.S. rhetoric in the first year of his presidency certainly contributed to the popular demand for more autonomous diplomacy over the alliance with the United States. As seen in *Figure 1*, however, support for autonomous diplomacy declined sharply in 2004 and 2006. Support for the Korea-U.S. alliance increased in the same years.

Figure 1: Public Opinion about Desirable Korea-U.S. Relations, 2002–06, percentage



Sources: EAI (2002, 2003, 2005); CCFR and EAI (2004, 2006).

One can argue that 2002 was an exceptional year; thus, the return of support for strengthening the alliance with the United States is a natural consequence. One can also think of the “fatigue” toward North Korea’s nuclear problem. As North Korea’s nuclear crisis has continued for more than five years, Koreans are becoming somewhat insensitive to the related issues. The issue of how to resolve the nuclear crisis divided Korean society in the early phase of the crisis. Proponents of an engagement policy have been demanding a peaceful and softer settlement, basing their argument on the “peace offensive” position that tougher resolution could bring war to the Korean peninsula. Conservatives criticized this approach as a coward’s appeasement that would lead to no settlement. Seeking an “independent” foreign policy meant assuring freedom of the Korean government to negotiate the tougher North Korea policy of the Bush administration. Earlier tension dissipated rather quickly, however, as the Bush administration took no action and the occasional six-party talks failed to generate any substantial results. This “vacant” stage seems to have freed the linkage of the Korea-U.S. alliance from North Korea issues.

Support for the stationing of the USFK has also been positive but not sufficient at the mass level. Compared with elites, ordinary Koreans tend to have more extreme views, but elite support for the USFK’s stay for the foreseeable future is stronger than the support of ordinary Korean citizens. Bilateral negotiations between Korea and the U.S. government on relocating the USFK and reducing its size appear to have contributed to more Koreans accepting the direction of gradual reduction. When Koreans were asked in a 2004 poll to estimate the national security effect of the reduction of the USFK to 23,000–25,000 over the next three years, 40 percent answered it would be negative while 60 percent answered it would be positive. When the same

question was asked again in 2006, only 31 percent answered it would be negative while 67 percent answered it would be positive (CCFR and EAI 2004; 2006). This estimation is contrasted with the accompanying expert polls. Korean security experts viewed the reduction negatively—67 percent said it would have a negative effect, and 31 percent said it would have a positive effect in 2004, and 46 percent claimed a negative effect compared with 44 percent who predicted a positive effect in 2006. The fear of being abandoned by the United States during the course of the USFK realignment seems to be limited to Korean elites who have been more pro-American than ordinary citizens. For related polling results, see *Table 1*.

Table 1: Public Opinion on the Future Status of U.S. Forces Korea, percentage

| Future status of U.S. Forces Korea | Elite opinion | | Popular opinion | |
|--|---------------|------|-----------------|------|
| | 2004 | 2006 | 2004 | 2006 |
| Should stay permanently | 4 | 4 | 13 | 8.9 |
| Should stay for the foreseeable future | 53 | 55 | 38 | 38.5 |
| Should reduce its size gradually | 41 | 38 | 43 | 49.2 |
| Should withdraw immediately | 2 | 2 | 6 | 2.9 |

Sources: CCFR and EAI (2004, 2006).

III. Korea's Domestic Factors Influencing Its Alliance with the United States

Domestic political change in South Korea preceded the U.S. strategic redefinition of the U.S.-Korea alliance. How Korean domestic politics would interact with the U.S. alliance and how the new Korean government would redraw its alliance relationship with the United States are vexing questions not only to Washington but also to Koreans themselves. If the first question is associated with a long-term perspective searching for a domestic base that is necessary to sustain the Korea-U.S. alliance within Korean society, the latter question is a practical one examining the policy orientation of the new Korean government.

The questioning of Korean support for the alliance with the United States was triggered by surging anti-U.S. sentiments in South Korea during the past half decade. Earlier efforts to understand the tension in the Korea-U.S. alliance paid attention to Korea's increasing national pride and its desire for recognition and respect from the United States. Reports from RAND (Larson et al. 2004) and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS 2003; Mitchell 2004) emphasized that the United States needs to understand the attitudinal changes among South Koreans toward the United

States and recommended more sensitive Korea policies by Washington and reach-out efforts by USFK in Korean society. Korean scholars, in contrast, site the challenge of the alliance in the structural change of Korean society that translates into an assertive nationalism and a new political leadership seeking independence from U.S. influence (Lee 2004, 2005; Kim and Lim 2007). Gaps between the United States and Korea in the perception of the threat of North Korea and diverging views of how to solve the problem of the North Korean nuclear program were widely recognized until recently as key sources of tension. Among domestic factors that can influence the Korea-U.S. alliance, three factors—Korean nationalism, new leadership, and changes in threat perceptions—need to be reexamined in a more critical fashion.

Assertive Nationalism and Support for the Korea-U.S. Alliance

One intriguing question regarding Korean nationalism is how exactly it is linked to Korea's critical attitudes about the United States. Recent studies of South Koreans' nationalism are divided into two views on the configuration of the Korean nation. One line of thought suggests that ethnic nationalism came to prevail over other ideas of the Korean nation. In the collectivistic idea of the nation (*minjok*)—based on common blood, shared ancestry, and a unique language—race and culture are inseparable. The tumultuous modern history of Korea has only reinforced ethnic nationalism. Japanese colonial rule bred the strong independence movement, and anti-Japanese sentiments still linger. Korea's subsequent division into two Koreas has made the task of reunifying the capitalist state and the communist state into one nation something close to a national duty or a spiritual cause. South Korea's successful economic development and its citizens' affluent way of life have not diluted Korea's nationalism. In this vein, Shin (2006) argues that decades of rapid industrialization and globalization have not uprooted ethnic nationalism. Rather, Koreans' ethnic identity has intensified in response to the penetration of these transnational forces. According to this line of thought, inter-Korean nationalism is strong, transcending the different state systems of South Korea and North Korea, and the U.S. policy of coercing or pressuring North Korea can be taken as being offensive to the South as well.

The other line of thought on South Koreans' nationalism limits it to nation-state nationalism, that is, "South Korean nationalism." Kang (2005) shows that the national identity of South Koreans centers on the political community that is limited to South Korea, and North Korea is regarded as a separate and different identity. This brand of nationalism seems to be supported by a declining support for a quick reunification. In the 2006 Global Views poll (CCFR and EAI 2006), only 15 percent of South Koreans supported reunification in the near future, 68 percent answered that reunification was necessary but saw no need for a quick reunification, and 17 percent had no interest in or saw no need for reunification at all.

Detachment from North Korea is found to be stronger among younger Koreans. Most of the public polls reveal that, compared with the older generation, younger Koreans tend to discount the need to be reunited with North Korea. This empirical finding of detachment from ethnic nationalism vis-à-vis the North among younger South Koreans poses an interesting question of how their anti-U.S. sentiments should be interpreted. If they view the tough North Korea policy of the United States in a critical way, it could be rooted in the reaction against U.S. unilateralism rather than in their sympathy for a nation of the same ethnicity and culture. In this aspect, anti-U.S. sentiments among young Koreans reflect general opposition to U.S. unilateralism, which one can also easily find among young Europeans.

It would be more logical to say that anti-U.S. sentiments are not an integral part of South Korean nationalism. Rather, anti-U.S. sentiments remain simply sentiments that tend to be capricious and driven by specific events. Thus, the framing of the social problems derived from hosting USFK is important. Casting prostitution near U.S. army bases as humanitarian concerns or pollution by USFK camps as environmental concerns allows for the possibility of practical resolutions without invoking the nationalistic feelings of Koreans. In contrast, when the issues are framed as an infringement of national sovereignty, as in the cases of the Yongsan Garrison or the “unfair” SOFA, feelings of deprived national dignity trigger anti-U.S. sentiments. Sensible public relations management of unfortunate accidents will be necessary for controlling damage in bilateral relations. Trust and credibility of the USFK would play a role of antidote. Outreach efforts by the USFK toward the local community are useful in building such trust and credibility.

Political Leadership and New-Generation Politics

It is widely recognized that one of the main social cleavages in contemporary Korean society is the generation gap. From 2002 to 2006, the *Chosun Daily* and Gallup carried out an annual survey to monitor ideological change in Korean society. The poll measured the ideological spectrum through responses to 15 questions, 5 each about political, economic, and social issues. According to the February 2006 poll, reported in the *Chosun Daily* on 4 March 2006, Koreans’ ideological orientations have made a “C turn”—that is, movement in the progressive direction was halted, with a turn toward the conservative on political and social issues.² Korean youths’ progressivism also has receded. Nevertheless, the generation gap in ideological orientations has deepened as the older generation has strengthened its conservative orientation.

2. The poll measured respondents’ answers on a scale of -50 to +50, with -50 being the most progressive and +50 being the most conservative, with 0 at the center.

Middle-aged Koreans dubbed the “3-8-6 generation”—a phrase coined for those who were born during the 1960s, spent their rebellious youth under the authoritarian regime of Chun Doo-hwan in the 1980s, and turned 30 during the 1990s—is widely viewed as a reform-oriented generation that played a central role in shaping Korean society and politics over the past two decades. This sociopolitical impact of this generation may be short-lived, however, particularly because of the current demographics of Korean society. The 2005 census showed that Koreans aged 10–19 make up 13.8 percent and those aged 20–29 make up 15.7 percent of the total population of about 47.2 million. Koreans in their 30s account for 17.5 percent; in their 40s, 17.1 percent; 50s, 10.9 percent; and 60 and over, 13.3 percent. Statistically, the 3-8-6 generation makes up less than 17 percent of the total population while the younger Koreans nurtured in democratized and affluent Korea account for about 40 percent of the total population.

Various polls reveal that the 3-8-6 generation tends to be more reform minded, more sympathetic to North Korea, and more critical of what they perceive as a unilateral U.S. foreign policy than members of other age groups.³ In contrast, the older generation, whose members spent their youth in poverty and worked for the nation’s industrialization, favors political stability, continuous growth, and a more stable society. The post-3-8-6 generation (born in the 1970s and 1980s) is recognized as being much less ideological and political than its predecessors. Park (2004) dubs this new generation the “N generation” that cherishes individual diversity, is active in the cyber community, and has strong cultural interests. As consumers of materialistic mass culture, the N generation is more responsive to cultural signs and symbols than political slogans. Recently, this younger generation is being recognized as a new force independent from its preceding generations. Younger voters in their 20s are mixed with both conservative and progressive voters so that it is difficult to characterize their political orientation along a single ideological line. Kim (2007) argues that this new generation has supported the 3-8-6 generation–led reforms conditionally and they will withdraw support when the progressive agendas of the 3-8-6–generation political leadership cannot persuade this younger generation with effective policies.

Thus, the attitude of Korea’s younger generation is ambivalent. Nurtured under a democratized, affluent, and pluralistic society, they are proud Koreans who view their country as an equal partner of the United States. They believe Korea needs an ally

3. They were young students, some in college, during the notorious Kwangju Incident of May 1980, when General Chun Doo-hwan repressed the popular demand to transfer power to a civilian government by massacring hundreds of Kwangju citizens and putting the area under martial law. He ruled the country officially until February 1988, but he was forced to give in to public pressure to hold a popular presidential election once again in 1987. The 3-8-6 cohort led the radical student movement to oppose Chun’s rule and contributed to the successful democratic transition in 1987. From these life experiences, the most progressive of Korea’s citizens evolved. The sense of empowerment that young people felt during the democratic transition has carried on to the current Korean government’s reform drive, in which a significant number of activists from this age cohort are participating.

that is useful in sustaining peace and strengthening the economy, but they want to be freed from the ally's unilateral influence. Envisioning the Korea-U.S. alliance as a horizontal partnership would facilitate the harmonization of their assertiveness to sustaining the alliance.

A more serious challenge to the Korea-U.S. alliance is the politicization of the alliance in Korea. Since Korea became a full democracy, Koreans' mistrust of politicians has been deep, and there has been a strong popular demand to replace old-fashioned politicians with cleaner and more competent people. Taking advantage of this social atmosphere, the number of younger politicians (National Assembly members), many of whom are former student movement leaders, has increased significantly over the years. The composition of the 17th National Assembly is particularly overrepresented by young politicians owing to the special nature of 2004 general election that was linked to the immensely unpopular impeachment of President Roh (*Table 2*). Forty percent of the ruling Uri Party National Assembly members were leaders in either the student movement or the democratization movement during the authoritarian period. Under this progressive composition of the ruling party, some of President Roh's more conservative policies, including the extended dispatch of Korean noncombatant troops to Iraq and the FTA with the United States, faced opposition from his own ruling party.

Table 2: Ages (Selected Decades) of Members of Korea's National Assembly, percentage

| National Assembly | 30–49 | 30–39 |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------|
| 17th National Assembly (2004) | 45.9 | 9.9 |
| 16th National Assembly (2000) | 32.9 | 5.9 |
| 15th National Assembly (1996) | 24.3 | 2.8 |
| 14th National Assembly (1992) | 25.0 | 3.0 |

Sources: National Election Commission; adapted from Kim (2007, 24).

It will be interesting to observe the composition of the new National Assembly in 2008, particularly how many seats the 3-8-6 politicians will be able to retain. This will be important for defining the nature of any peace agreement with North Korea and navigating its potential influence on the alliance with the United States. Again, agenda setting and any major policy cleavage in the 2008 general election will be essentially influenced by the new president who will be elected in December 2007.

Perception Gap about North Korea

With the action plan agreed on 13 February 2007 at the fifth round of the six-party talks, the prolonged North Korean nuclear threat seems to be moving toward a peaceful denuclearization of North Korea. It took almost 18 months to delineate the action plan from its base, that is, the 19 September joint statement at the fourth round of six-party talks in 2005. Following the first phase of the action plan, North Korea stopped the operation of the Yongbyon nuclear facilities and accepted the International Atomic Energy Agency's investigation. As the recent round of the six-party talks on 3 October 2007 agreed on the second-phase actions for the implementation of the joint statement, North Korea is expected to follow the outlined road map for a declaration of its all nuclear programs and disablement of its core nuclear facilities at Yongbyon by the end of 2007. Since the turnaround of the Bush administration and its more active move for negotiations with North Korea, policy discords between the South Korea and the United States over North Korea's nuclear problem have disappeared for the present. Nevertheless, the policies of both governments can diverge at any time owing to their fundamentally different perceptions of North Korea's nuclear threat.

To the United States, North Korea's ability to produce nuclear weapons runs counter to its commitment to effective governance of the nonproliferation regime. Furthermore, the possibility of nuclear weapons transfer to terrorist groups poses an unacceptable risk to the United States. A significant number of U.S. strategists consider the regime collapse of North Korea as the most assured path to eliminate such a risk. Even moderates (for example, Allison [2004, 73]), who urge the Bush administration to undertake speedier bilateral negotiations with North Korea, think the United States should threaten North Korea with the use of all means, including military force, if the North refuses to verifiably relinquish nuclear weapons. South Korea, in contrast, has sought to lower tensions on the Korean peninsula and has expanded engagement ever since the June 2000 summit meeting between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il.

Despite continuous challenges from the domestic opposition, the Korean leadership has pursued engagement as the best way to bring about needed changes in North Korea. North Korea's collapse or any form of military conflict on the Korean peninsula has been regarded as an unacceptable option. As the Bush administration and the Roh Moo-hyun government have been voicing diverging priorities, policy coordination has been highly elusive. Making matters worse, Korea's domestic politics have been locked in an open battle between those favoring coordination with North Korea (*minjok kongjo*) and those emphasizing coordination with the United States (*hanmi kongjo*), all to the detriment of the alliance (Atlantic Council 2007).

South Koreans' perception of North Korea's threat has weakened dramatically during the past decade. Regarding North Korea's nuclear weapons program, 59 percent of

Koreans viewed it as a “very serious threat” to their national interest in a 2004 poll, *Global Views*, but this figure dropped to 50 percent in the 2006 poll (CCFR and EAI 2004, 2006). By 2006, global warming was seen as a more serious threat, receiving 67 percent in the 2006 poll. More Koreans (9 percent more) considered the spread of avian flu as a more serious threat than North Korea’s nuclear program.

According to the *Global Views* polls, 75 percent of South Koreans in the 2004 poll believed that North Korea had nuclear weapons, a figure that rose to 81 percent in the 2006 poll (CCFR and EAI 2004, 2006). When they were asked in 2004 “How much would you feel threatened if North Korea had nuclear weapons?” 39 percent answered “seriously threatened” and 49 percent answered “somewhat threatened,” while 12 percent answered “don’t feel threatened.” Two years later, in 2006, the percentage that answered “seriously threatened” decreased to 29.7 percent while “no threat” increased to 21.2 percent. In the 2006 poll, 63 percent of South Koreans supported limited economic assistance to North Korea for humanitarian purposes while 12 percent supported ceasing economic assistance. Those who thought the current level of assistance to North Korea was adequate made up 17.6 percent of those polled while only 6.5 percent answered that the South should increase its assistance.

In a nutshell, a majority of South Koreans sees North Korea’s nuclear weapons program not as a grave threat; however, they also want to limit economic assistance to the North. Certainly, such declining threat perceptions will not be congruent with a Korea-U.S. alliance that is based mostly on the North Korean threat.

IV. Policy Options for a Sustainable Korea-U.S. Alliance

The volatile nature of Korean politics surrounding the next presidential election makes it difficult to safely predict its outcome in December. Lee Myung-bak of the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) currently enjoys a lead in the polls. He has said that he will try to reinforce relations with the United States that had been weakened under the Roh government. If he is elected, policy coordination between Seoul and Washington is expected to be considerably smoother since a conservative leadership would find less policy discord in North Korea policy. Lee’s camp has reiterated the primacy of dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear program over any other cooperative policies toward the North. Nevertheless, Lee proposed an ambitious North Korea program that aims at increasing per capita income of North Koreans through economic cooperation with the South. In July 2007, less than a month earlier than the GNP’s primary election, the conservative GNP proposed a new “Peace Vision of the Korean Peninsula” that included significantly different plans, including facilitation of inter-Korean economic cooperation, free travel across the South Korea–North Korea border, opening for North Korean broadcasting and newspapers, and humanitarian

aid to poor North Koreans. According to a poll taken by *JoongAng Daily* and reported on 26 July 2007, this policy shift was viewed positively by half of the Koreans, while 29 percent viewed it negatively. It seems safe to say that the GNP will modify its traditional North Korea policy and shift toward a more proactive direction if its candidate is elected as Korea's new president.

On 15 October 2007, the United New Democratic Party chose the former unification minister, Chung Dong-young, as its presidential candidate. The presidential election is widely viewed as a competition between differing visions of a strong economy vs. peace on the Korean peninsula. Lee Myung-bak is expected to lead in economic issues while Chung Dong-young is expected to be aggressive with peace issues and inter-Korean cooperation. With the inter-Korean summit meetings on 3 and 4 October, the peace agenda is gaining strength over the economic agenda that has dominated presidential election debates during most of 2007.

The eight-point declaration signed by Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong-il on 4 October 2007 called for an end to the military hostility between the two sides and a three- or four-party summit on a permanent peace treaty for the Korean peninsula. They also agreed to expand cross-border investments and economic cooperation projects and create a special peace zone in the West Sea. Although most policies are subject to decisions of South Korea's new president, a bold initiative such as concluding a peace treaty and creating a special peace zone would strengthen the question of inter-Korean cooperation as a major election campaign issue.

The Korea-U.S. alliance is not an important issue in the coming election, and most presidential candidates state that the alliance is important. Nevertheless, the future of the alliance would be deeply affected by who will be the next president of South Korea. Intertwined with the agenda of an inter-Korean peace regime and the welcome normalization negotiations between the United States and North Korea, the Korea-U.S. alliance can be reinvigorated or be marginalized by the politics of the new government.

This paper maintains that Korean support for the alliance with the United States remains high but not strong enough to reinvigorate it. Generational change and contemporary reform politics in South Korea have not provided a solid and stable base for sustaining a strong alliance into the foreseeable future. If the action plan of the six-party talks is successfully implemented in a way that would completely dismantle North Korea's nuclear weapons program, talks on ending the Korean War formally and on U.S.-North Korea normalization are likely to be realized. How Korean politics unfolds under this totally new security environment is difficult to imagine. One certainty would be renewed pressure from North Korea and the leftist groups within South Korea to legitimize the Korea-U.S. alliance. Thus, it will be essential to prepare a

comprehensive new settlement on the Korean peninsula so as not to jeopardize the Korea-U.S. alliance. Structural changes in Korean society and the possibility of a new comprehensive settlement suggest the following policy options:

Move beyond the North Korean threat. It will serve the sustainability of the Korea-U.S. alliance well if a new rationale beyond the deterrence of North Korean aggression can be articulated in the near future. Koreans no longer see North Korea as the major security threat it once was. The majority of the Korean population comprises people who do not possess a cold war mentality toward the North, and the policy discord between Seoul and Washington is viewed critically. The Korea-U.S. alliance needs a new vision for its existence.

Upgrade South Korea's regional role within the Korea-U.S. alliance framework. As an effort to reinvigorate the Korea-U.S. alliance, the United States should be able to tap the energy and creativity of Korean nationalism to the benefit of peace and prosperity in the region. When the alliance is viewed as a bridge linking South Korea to the region and the world in a constructive way, popular support for the alliance will be sustained for the foreseeable future. Political leadership in South Korea also needs to shape the country's dynamic nationalism into an integral force for open regionalization.

Navigate the peace agreement and the U.S.-North Korea normalization to harmonize with the Korea-U.S. alliance. New deals on the Korean peninsula, including establishing an inter-Korean peace regime and diplomatic normalization between the United States and North Korea, should proceed with the greatest caution in order not to adversely affect the status of the Korea-U.S. alliance. Mutual trust and intensive consultation between South Korean and U.S. officials will be needed to navigate these great experiments in the interest of sustaining the alliance.

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