The United States and the PRC share a near-term interest in stability on the Korean peninsula, and it is one of the obvious areas on which a dialogue regarding respective strategic interests is necessary and desirable. At the same time, American and Chinese longer-term interests in the orientation of a unified Korea are likely to come into conflict with each other. Despite the relatively low priority of Korea as an issue in U.S.-PRC relations, the United States and China share common interests in preserving stability and preserving nuclear nonproliferation on the Korean Peninsula that may aptly be called the “three no’s” of policy toward the Korean Peninsula: no nukes, no war, and no collapse of North Korea. The second North Korean nuclear crisis and the Bush administration’s handling of policy toward North Korea, however, show that these three fundamental points of agreement are increasingly being tested.

The North Korean nuclear crisis of 1993-94 provided an initial opportunity to move the Korean peninsula onto the agenda of U.S.-PRC dialogue, particularly as the United States sought China’s help in urging North Korea not to abandon the NPT. China clearly is a key player in any effort to meet North Korea’s nuclear challenge, as can be seen by the recent flurry of U.S. diplomatic activity centered on mobilizing China’s leverage to respond to North Korea’s departure from the NPT and open pursuit of a possible nuclear weapons program. The second shared U.S.-PRC “no” in policy toward the Korean peninsula is “no war.” Neither the United States nor the PRC would be interested in seeing renewed military aggression that would lead to military conflict between North and South Korea, and China has indicated that it would not intervene in a conflict on the Korean peninsula instigated by North Korea. However, in the event of military conflict instigated by South Korea or third parties including the United States, it is important to note China has not renounced its treaty obligations to fight with North Korea. Thirdly, the United States and China have taken humanitarian actions that, if examined together, suggest that neither party favors any destabilizing collapse of North Korea, which would involve spillover and instability beyond North Korea’s borders, although tensions over the North Korean refugee issues have come onto the U.S.-China radar screen and there is increasing support in some quarters of the United States for a policy of “regime change” for North Korea involving pressuring and collapse. However, this is not an official policy of the U.S. government and there is no convincing evidence to date that the U.S. government is actively pursuing such a policy.

Following the events of September 11th and the naming of North Korea as part of the “axis of evil” in January of 2002, greater distrust and concern appears to have developed in Beijing over the U.S. handling of events on the Korean peninsula, particularly given that China has consistently supported engagement of North Korea consistent with the objectives of the South Korean Sunshine Policy. At the very least, the Sunshine Policy
has been welcomed in Beijing because it reduces the financial burdens China must face in order to help keep North Korea afloat. There has been enhanced U.S.-PRC cooperation on anti-terrorism issues, and while President Bush publicly called upon PRC President Jiang Zemin to convey the Bush administration’s willingness to engage in dialogue with the DPRK during his February visit, the combination of the public calls for engagement and the “axis of evil” comments left many Chinese Korean specialists even more suspicious about U.S. intentions in its policy toward the DPRK. The North Korean issue also climbed onto the agenda last October at the Crawford summit, and President Bush has called President Jiang Zemin following North Korea’s announcement of its withdrawal from the NPT in apparent hopes that Beijing will take concrete action to restrain the leadership in Pyongyang from taking precipitous actions. At the same time, it is hard to imagine that Chinese policy makers have been losing sleep over the apparent divergences in policy that have appeared between Washington and Seoul to the extent that it may suggest a long-term weakening of the foundations for perpetuating the U.S.-South Korea alliance relationship.

Analysts in both China and the United States have inevitably begun to consider how their respective responses to North Korea may shape the future regional security order in Asia. Repeated public references by Defense Secretary William Cohen even following the inter-Korean summit to the need for U.S. forces to remain on the Korean peninsula even after Korean reunification were repeated with more credibility by South Korean President Kim Dae Jung. President-elect Roh Moo-hyun has recently reiterated such pledges although the surge in anti-Americanism among South Korea’s younger generation provides a distinct counterweight to those who may see the U.S.-ROK security alliance as an inevitable part of the security architecture of the region. South Korean public opinion clearly shows that up to now, no convincing rationale has been put forward for maintaining a U.S. troop presence in South Korean in a post-North Korean threat context, although that view may have greater appeal among certain segments of South Korean elite opinion. Thus, the erosion of the perception of threat from North Korea will eventually require the South Korean government to make critical decisions and lead the South Korean public in a broad debate over South Korea’s future security orientation, a discussion that will inevitably require additional scrutiny by South Korean’s of the future of their security relationships with all parties in the region, foremost among them China and the United States.

China has for the time being reluctantly accepted the necessity and contribution of the U.S. forward presence in Japan and Korea as a stabilizing force and as a matter for the United States and South Korea to decide, although its clear preference in principle is for U.S. forces not to be stationed on the Korean peninsula. Tang Shiping has made the following argument in favor of a new regional security framework, a “Great Power Concert Plus” that would accompany Korean reunification. Tang asks, “Will a reunified Korea continue to ally itself with the U.S., thus causing anxiety in Beijing, or will it bandwagon with China, thus causing alarm in Washington about China’s expanding sphere of influence? Or will it choose to go it alone, thus creating more uncertainty than the status quo?” His preferred solution is a neutral, reunified Korea whose security is underwritten by the neighboring powers. While allowing for a U.S. role, Tang argues that
in order to move in this direction, it is necessary to challenge several myths, among which he includes the myth that "the U.S. is the indispensable nation," and "that U.S. presence in the region has to mean alliance... maintaining U.S. presence does not have to mean that U.S. engagement with the region has to rely exclusively upon its alliance system, it can also mean that the U.S. can take a more balanced approach toward alliance and multilateralism." Other Chinese analysts have traditionally begrudgingly accepted a U.S. troop presence on the Korean peninsula as a stabilizing regional influence, but have clearly expected that such a presence would be neither justified not sustainable beyond the end of the inter-Korean confrontation, a view that increasingly appears to be grounded in a solid analysis of Korean opinion, given the cracks that have developed in the U.S.-ROK alliance and ambivalent support for continued U.S. troops on the Korean peninsula beyond Korean reunification.

The burgeoning Sino-South Korean economic relationship—and its influence as a driver for the overall tone and future prospects for the comprehensive relationship between South Korea and the PRC—can not help but have long-term implications for South Korean views of its own economic, security, and political interests. These views, in turn, will inevitably affect South Korean views of the U.S. – ROK security alliance. Some of the variables that will influence the ways in which changes in Sino-South Korean relations will influence attitudes toward the U.S. – ROK Security alliance included the scope, pace, and prospects for continued economic expansion of the Sino-South Korean trade and investment relationship, the status and prospects for inter-Korean reconciliation and perceptions of outside actors as either contributing to or inhibiting that process, and the state of Sino-U.S. relations and its potential impact on the Korean peninsula, especially as it relates to inter-Korean reconciliation. Areas where the developing Sino-ROK relationship may bring new pressures to bear in the U.S. – ROK alliance include how to manage North Korea’s nuclear challenge; how to manage political instability and/or collapse in North Korea, including the issue of whether or not to encourage North Korean refugee flows to South Korea; and the future presence of U.S. forces in a post-North Korean threat environment, in which it is likely that South Korea may “tilt” even more toward China economically and politically, perhaps even at the expense of its traditional alliance relations with the United States.

Projections for the future of the Sino-ROK economic relationship are rosy, and despite sporadic but increasing trade disputes and diplomatic difficulties over a wide range of issues including protection of South Koreans in China, the South Korean government's relationship with and status of China’s Korean ethnic minority, and management of the North Korean refugee issue have ultimately not been allowed to impinge on the trade relationship in any way. The broadening set of problems in the relationship is in fact providing opportunities to forge a deeper and multi-faceted relationship that goes beyond immediate economic interests and provides broad knowledge of each other’s societies.

Over 2.25 million tourists traveled between China and South Korea in 2002, with over 1.72 million South Koreans visiting China (or almost one quarter of all South Koreans who traveled abroad in 2002). China has surpassed Japan in 2002 as the likeliest destination for international flights from Incheon International Airport, and regulations
have recently been relaxed that should allow more ethnic Koreans form China to come to Korea. Over 24,000 South Koreans were studying in China in 2002, dominating many of the Chinese language programs for foreigners in Beijing and Shanghai. South Korean interest in China is being reciprocated to a certain extent in the form of rising tourism to South Korea (Chinese tourists to South Korea topped 540,000, representing just over ten percent of the 5.3 million foreign travelers to South Korea), the popularity in 2001-2002 of Korean popular culture (known as the Korean “wave”), and Chinese receptivity to higher quality Korean “white goods,” cosmetics, mobile phones, and other upscale consumer goods made in Korea. Whereas there was no “China lobby” a decade ago in South Korea, there is now a pro-China group within the business community and among South Korean legislators.

The growth of Sino-ROK economic relations has already affected South Korean government positions on a wide array of political matters. Direct air ties to Taiwan have resumed in 2003 after over a decade of having been cut at the time of Korea’s decision to normalize its relationship with Beijing and end ties with Taipei. The Dalai Lama has never visited South Korea, and was even denied a seat on an Asiana Airlines flight to Mongolia in 2002. South Koreans are very sensitive about visits from Taiwan government officials, and have refused to grant political asylum to Xu Bo, a Chinese former democracy activist from the PRC who was involved with the Tiananmen protests in 1989. The South Korean government has been rather reticent in its stance on receiving North Korean refugees, bowing to a quiet Chinese request not to accept North Koreans for asylum at South Korean diplomatic facilities in the PRC until the summer of 2002, when a number of North Korean refugees who had entered foreign diplomatic compounds in Beijing were sent to Seoul. At the insistence of South Korean civic groups, the government has negotiated a new approach in which publicity for North Korean refugees granted asylum via the South Korean consulate is minimized, but limited numbers have been allowed to come directly to Seoul from China. As South Korea’s bilateral trade with China surpasses that of its bilateral trade with the United States, it is possible that there may be U. S. –ROK alliance issues that arise or other aspects of U. S. –ROK cooperation that could be inhibited by South Korea’s growing attention to the concerns and opinions of the PRC.

Another factor that will influence South Korean perceptions of the U. S. –ROK security alliance will be the pace and progress of inter-Korean reconciliation and policy coordination in managing issues related to North Korea. To the extent that China has given consistent rhetorical support to president Kim Dae Jung’s Sunshine Policy and has indicated its desire to see the inter-Korean reconciliation process proceed peacefully, Korean views of China and its role in inter-Korean reconciliation have been positive. China’s consistent support for Kim Dae Jung’s Sunshine Policy is in line with its desire for a peaceful periphery that does not inhibit its economic development, but the official Chinese reaction to the announcement of the inter-Korean summit was also notable for its welcome of the autonomous efforts of the two Korean leaders to pursue inter-Korean reconciliation. In turn, Chinese analysts viewed the crash efforts of the Clinton administration in October of 2002 with great caution and a measure of concern that a breakthrough in U. S. – DPPK relations could have negative consequences for PRC
interests on the Korean peninsula.

The Bush administration’s relative skepticism of North Korea and its unwillingness to engage in dialogue with Pyongyang has allowed Beijing to take the inside track in Korean public opinion regarding which country is most likely to be supportive of inter-Korean relations. Although South Korean public recognition of the importance of China and its role in inter-Korean reconciliation pre-dates the beginning of the Bush administration, the President Bush’s “axis of evil” comments and the overall reluctance of the Bush administration to engage with North Korea prior to and during the second North Korean nuclear crisis have reenforced South Korean public perceptions that the United States is either an obstacle to or irrelevant to the process of inter-Korean reconciliation, while China is perceived as supportive and helpful—this despite continuing tensions with the PRC on the stern handling of North Korean refugees. This turn in public opinion inevitable makes the task of maintaining support for the U. S. – ROK alliance and troop presence on the Korean peninsula much more difficult than before.

South Korean affinity for China is growing at the same time that anti-American feeling among the younger generation in South Korea is also coming to the surface. Chung Jae Ho has found on the basis of public opinion surveys that Korea finds itself stuck between the United States and China: “First, Korea is more tightly tied to the U. S. than it wishes to be. [And] second, Korea's perceptions of China are highly favorable even though the genuine intentions of the latter remain unclear.” A directed survey of a small group of emerging generation Korean leaders compiled by William Watts in 2001 shows that “a majority sees links with China assuming greater importance than those with the U. S.” Coupled with rising anti-American sentiment, the Korean perception of China’s rising importance as an influential player and possible arbiter of inter-Korean reconciliation and reunification without giving serious consideration to the potential for Sino-Korean conflict suggests that the Korean debate over its own security future could be quite contentious and may have direct implications for the future of the U. S. – ROK security alliance.

**Conclusion: Future of the U. S. – ROK Security Alliance and Emergence of a Rising China**

China’s rising share in Korea’s external economic relations and perceived cultural complementarily will inevitably constrain Korean political cooperation with the United States in the event of U. S. – PRC confrontation. Closer Sino-South Korean relations could indirectly produce strains in the U. S. – ROK security alliance, although the alliance remains critical for now in Korean perceptions until a true peace is achieved on the Korean penindula. Korean security specialists with a focus on China recognize that the rise of China is “the most serious security dilemma that the ROK will face in the mid-to long-term.” When confronted with the contradictions inherent in balancing Korea’s rapidly developing economic interests on the one hand with the requirements of the U. S. – ROK security alliance on the other hand, Korean analysts argue that the Cold War is over and it is no longer necessary to view political, security, and economic relationships in zero-sum terms. Korean analysts examine the level of economic interdependence between the United States and China and conclude that the nature of the U. S.
The relationship with China is different from the old Soviet Union, arguing that the possibility of a "partnership-like relationship" between the United States and China should not be excluded in the future. Given the stakes involved, many Korean analysts appear to be in denial regarding prospective Sino-U. S. confrontation, and the ROK Government "has taken no concrete steps in planning on these issues."\(^{13}\)

South Koreans favor strategies that avoid escalation of U. S. – China disputes and emphasize cooperative relationships between Washington and Beijing. Given the intermittently confrontational track of the U. S. - PRC relationship, the issue of how to deal with China is gradually becoming a likely source of future differences in the U. S. – ROK relationship. It is important for diplomatic consultations and coordination on policies toward the PRC to be enhanced as a vehicle for minimizing alliance differences and building support within the alliance relationship. Korea’s prosperous trade relationship with China is increasingly obscuring the view that stability in the region derives from the security relationship with the United States. The vision of Korea as a regional hub of an economically interdependent Northeast Asia is likely to be a central goal of the new South Korean administration, a vision that may eventually come to see the alliance as an inhibitor to cooperative security rather than as a bulwark for deterring longstanding conflicts among regional powers that have historically beset the Korean peninsula. Under current circumstances South Korea will choose the relationship with the United States when pressed to do so. However, the PRC is developing new-found economic leverage as Korean economic prospects are integrated with its own domestic economic expansion. Thus, Korea’s continued liberalization and a strong U. S. economic presence----as market for Korean goods, as investor in the Korean market, and as guarantor of regional economic and security stability----will increasingly become an essential underpinning if there is to be any hope of ensuring that Korea’s orientation and feelings of shared values remain strongly with the United States, despite Korea’s emotional affinity for China.


\(^{3}\) Author conversations with Beijing-based analysts, March 2002.


\(^{6}\) Andrew Petty, “Should the Dalai Lama be allowed into Korea?: Campaign to invite Tibetan spiritual leader gears up in response to Seoul government's reluctance to issue a visa,” Korea Herald, December 6, 2002.


\(^{8}\) See “For Another Fruitful Decade,” Korea Herald, August 24, 2002, P. 6.

\(^{9}\) For instance, a JoongAng Ilbo survey conducted two months following the inter-Korean summit.
showed that thirty percent of respondents expected China to be most helpful to Korean reunification, compared to 26.5 percent for the United States and 14.1 percent for Japan. Among countries least helpful to Korean reunification, Japan rated 39.3 percent, the United States, 28.2 percent, and China, 9.2 percent. JoongAng Ilbo, August 14, 2000, P. 10.


12 William Watts, NEXT GENERATION LEADERS IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA: Opinion Survey Report and Analysis, April 2002. “U. S. vis-a vis Chia. In one of the most significant findings in this survey, majorities of almost all survey categories ranked future ties with China as more important than those the United States, with highest numbers among NGO representatives and women. Two groups stood out as putting the U. S. first: members of academia, many of whom have exceptionally close ties with their counterparts in the United States; and the military, with unique bonds with American colleagues,” P. 17.

13 Author interviews with South Korean specialists, November 2001.