

## **-"Transforming an Asymmetric Cold War Alliance: Psychological and Strategic Challenges for South Korea and the U.S."<sup>1</sup>**

**by Wonhyuk Lim<sup>2</sup>**

### **Introduction**

Since the end of the Korean War, an asymmetric alliance in which the client sacrifices part of its autonomy in exchange for the security provided by the patron has defined the relationship between South Korea (or Republic of Korea (ROK)) and the United States.<sup>3</sup> In my talk, I would like to analyze psychological and strategic challenges South Korea and the United States face as they attempt to transform this asymmetric Cold War alliance into a more equal partnership better designed to promote peace in Northeast Asia and around the world.

Despite repeated government assurances to the contrary, the ROK-U.S. alliance is adrift. No one is taking ownership of the alliance issue to articulate its vision and prescribe necessary adjustments in the same way as Joseph Nye and others did when the U.S.-Japan alliance was in trouble in the mid-1990s.<sup>4</sup> Rather than pretending there is nothing wrong or letting uncoordinated solutions to technical problems redefine the alliance, it would be better to acknowledge the existing problems and reformulate the rationale for the alliance.

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<sup>1</sup> This is based on a talk given at the Korea Society on April 12, 2006. An earlier version of this talk was presented at the conference on *The Changing Korean Peninsula and the Future of East Asia*, co-hosted by Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies, The Brookings Institution, Seoul Forum for International Affairs, and *JoongAng Ilbo*, December 1, 2005, Seoul. The complete transcript of the conference is available at <http://www.brookings.edu/fp/cnaps/events/20051201.htm>.

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<sup>3</sup> On July 14, 1950, less than 20 days after North Korea had started the Korean War, President Syngman Rhee placed South Korea's forces under the operational command of General Douglas MacArthur in his capacity as commander-in-chief (CINC) of the United Nations Command. The 1953 ROK-US mutual defense treaty essentially retained this military command arrangement. In the words of a former CINC, it represented "the most remarkable concession of sovereignty in the entire world." See William M. Drennan, "US-ROK Defense Cooperation," in *The Future of America's Alliances in Northeast Asia*, ed. by Michael H. Armacost and Daniel I. Okimoto (Stanford: Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2004), pp.177-89. However, an alternative or complementary interpretation of this arrangement is also possible: By making the defense of the ROK a shared responsibility between the ROK and the United States, the ROK was able to stick itself to the United States "like the Tar Baby to Brer Rabbit." See Selig S. Harrison, *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp.174-5.

<sup>4</sup> For a useful comparative perspective between the U.S. bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea, see Michael H. Armacost, "The Future of America's Alliances in Northeast Asia," in *The Future of America's Alliances in Northeast Asia*, ed. by Michael H. Armacost and Daniel I. Okimoto (Stanford: Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2004), pp.11-24, especially, pp.12-13.

Ironically, the current trouble in the alliance is in many ways a product of its own success. The alliance deterred communist aggression and helped to provide South Korea a secure environment for its rapid economic and political development.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the alliance was so successful that by the end of the 1990s, South Korea had grown increasingly uncomfortable with its original premises. The U.S.-Soviet rivalry had ended, South Korea had normalized relations with Russia and China, inter-Korean rapprochement had begun, and South Korea had become a democratic market economy with increasing self-confidence. What may be called “the dismantlement of the Cold War structure on the Korean peninsula” seemed to be in sight. Moreover, the fundamental asymmetry built into the alliance had become a source of tension between the ROK and the United States.

Of course, alliance transformation, or the adjustment of an alliance to a changed environment, is nothing new in geopolitics. In fact, important lessons can be drawn from the transformation of U.S. alliances with Western Europe and Japan after the perceived common threat of communist aggression disappeared.<sup>6</sup> However, alliance transformation in the ROK-U.S. case is rather unique in two respects.

First, atypical of U.S. client states—and, for that matter, rare among underdeveloped countries in general—South Korea has achieved something close to middle-power status through industrialization and democratization. These internal changes have rendered obsolete some of the basic premises underpinning the asymmetric alliance. Simply put, South Korea can now afford to take up greater security responsibilities and it would like to deal with the United States on more equal terms. Such alliance transformation would require psychological as well as technical adjustments in the terms of interaction between the two sides. This is a rather unique challenge.

Although the Philippines and Taiwan may be regarded as other successful examples among U.S. client states, the alliance transformation challenges posed by their economic and political development seem to be rather different from the ROK case. For

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<sup>5</sup> Edward L. King, a retired U.S. Senate professional staff member and Korean War veteran, felt a great sense of accomplishment when he came back to South Korea in 2003 with his fellow war veterans, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the alliance. He said: “My last view of Korea and Seoul in 1952 was just a pile of rubble.... Then I descended from the airplane in 2003 and I saw high-rises, super-highways, multiple modern bridges spanning the Han River.... When we saw Seoul and the prosperous Korean people we thought to ourselves, ‘My God, our sacrifices really did accomplish something worthwhile here in the war that too many Americans have long forgotten.’ We helped provide Korea the opportunity to prosper and build a democratic society.” The quote is taken from Edward L. King’s interview with Dynamic-Korea.com on Aug. 24, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Richard G. Lugar, “Redefining NATO’s Mission: Preventing WMD Terrorism,” *Washington Quarterly* 25:3 (Summer 2002), pp.7-13; James Kitfield and Robert von Rimscha, “Shifting Values and Changing Interests: The Future of the German-American Relations” (Washington, DC: American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, Johns Hopkins University, 2004); and Yukio Okamoto, “Japan and the United States: The Essential Alliance,” *Washington Quarterly* 25:2 (Spring 2002), pp.59-72.

the Philippines, the future of the alliance discussions with the United States almost exclusively revolved around a single issue, the return of the Subic Bay base. For Taiwan, which actually is not a formal ally of the United States, the autonomy-for-security exchange in its complex relationship with the United States is not really a source of discontent given the perceived threat of a rising China. The challenge for the United States in this case is not so much to craft a “more equal” partnership as to prevent Taiwan’s vibrant democracy from taking a unilateral action for independence.<sup>7</sup>

From a comparative perspective, the U.S. bilateral alliances with Germany and Japan, the two defeated powers, were also quite different because these alliances were designed not only to address perceived common threats but also to “bottle-cap” their remilitarization. Moreover, because Germany and Japan had attained great-power status before World War II, the degree of psychological adjustment needed to acknowledge and accept their resurgence was relatively small.

The second difference is that, unlike in Europe, the transformation of the U.S. alliances in Northeast Asia is taking place even as the vestiges of the Cold War remain. In Europe, the transformation of the U.S.-Germany alliance, for example, took place after the end of the Cold War and the reunification of Germany. By contrast, the transformation of the ROK-U.S. alliance is taking place against the backdrop of partial normalization of relations in Northeast Asia. North Korea has yet to normalize with the United States and Japan, and although it sounds rather far-fetched at the moment, there is even speculation that deterioration in the U.S.-China relations might lead to another Cold War. This unsettled state of affairs in Northeast Asia forms the background of noticeable divergences in threat perception among allies, as they have yet to craft a common strategic vision for the region.

In order to highlight the nature of the alliance transformation challenges, I'd like to look at the state of the ROK-U.S. alliance along the following four dimensions: 1) perceived threats, 2) economic interests, 3) values, and 4) residual factors, including something called “goodwill.” These are typically regarded as four binding forces in alliance politics.

## **1. Perceived Threats**

### ***North Korea***

In recent years, a number of scholars and practitioners have noted that divergent perspectives on the perceived threat from North Korea (or Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK)) represent the biggest challenge to the ROK-U.S. alliance. Although some observers blame South Korea’s “sunshine policy” and the inter-Korean summit in 2000 for this divergence, its origins seem to have more to do with the end of a meaningful “system competition” between South and North Korea, rather than any particular line of policy toward North Korea. In particular, the horrific images of

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<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of these policy challenges, see Richard C. Bush, *Untying the Knot: Making Peace in the Taiwan Strait* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

undernourished children and other reminders of North Korea's economic decline appear to have had a significant impact on popular views of North Korea since the mid-1990s. Indeed, dramatic changes had taken place in the relative position of South Korea and North Korea since the 1960s.

However, it would be an exaggeration to claim that South Korea no longer regards North Korea as a threat. If that were really the case, there would not be so much nervousness or uneasiness in South Korea about major changes in the ROK-U.S. alliance in general and redeployment of the USFK (U.S. Forces in Korea) in particular. Instead of asserting South Korea's threat perception is clouded by naïveté and wishful thinking, as some American observers do, it may be more productive to analyze the two allies' divergent perspectives on perceived threats.<sup>8</sup>

The first issue is the perception of North Korea's nuclear threat and the notion of deterrence. North Korea already has long-range artillery tubes aimed at South Korea, and as a consequence, the *marginal* threat from North Korea's nuclear weapons is not big for South Korea; whereas, for the United States, the incremental threat from North Korea's nuclear weapons is rather large, especially if the weapons wind up in the hands of terrorist organizations.<sup>9</sup> Now, by threatening a pre-emptive strike against North Korea, the United States can raise South Korea's perceived marginal threat from North Korea's nuclear weapons in a roundabout way and align the two allies' threat perception. However, this kind of approach risks a nationalist backlash from South Korea. As was the case in the days of mutually assured destruction (MAD), deterrence may not be a completely reassuring proposition, but realistically there may be no better option.

Moreover, while the U.S. concern about the spread of nuclear weapons is understandable in the post-9/11 world, this concern should be placed in context. In the first place, given the lopsided military balance between the U.S. and North Korea, it would be suicidal for North Korea to go beyond bluster and actually transfer fissile material so as to threaten American lives. Also, if the U.S. is concerned that economic desperation might drive North Korea to sell nuclear weapons, the U.S. should recognize that it does have political and economic resources to address North Korea's insecurities and reduce the risk of proliferation in a diplomatic give-and-take. By contrast, a policy of "malign neglect" based on low-grade sanctions against North Korea runs the risk of strengthening North Korea's bargaining position by making its nuclear weapons a *fait accompli*.

Another bone of contention between the two allies is a seeming contradiction in South Korea's position between North Korea not being allowed to develop nuclear weapons on the one hand, and military options being off the table on the other. However,

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<sup>8</sup> For a thoughtful analysis of the two allies' divergent perspectives, see Scott Snyder, "A Comparison of U.S. and South Korean National Security Strategies: Implications for Alliance Coordination toward North Korea," in *North Korea 2005 and Beyond*, ed. by Philip W. Yun and Gi-Wook Shin (Stanford, CA: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2006), pp.149-66.

<sup>9</sup> Marcus Noland has made this point in his writings. See, for instance, Marcus Noland, *Korea after Kim Jong-il* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 2003).

from South Korea's perspective, military measures designed to destroy North Korea's nuclear capability is likely to lead to a full-blown conflict on the Korean Peninsula. The cure is worse than the disease itself, as it raises the possibility of suffering “a collateral damage” for the South Korean people.

In this regard, an analogy may be drawn with the West Germans' opposition to the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in their homeland in the early 1980s. Deterring Soviet aggression might be a noble cause, but the outbreak of a nuclear war on German soil would make the whole exercise a futile one—at least for the Germans, most of whom thought greater inter-German exchanges and “change through rapprochement” offered better prospects for peace and security. Although the West German government eventually agreed to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in spite of the popular protest, one wonders what course it would have taken if the issue at hand had been not merely the deployment of weapons but the real possibility of a pre-emptive strike triggering full-scale war, as in the case of South Korea in 1994.<sup>10</sup>

In short, the United States and South Korea, and to some extent China, share common interests in preventing the production and spread of nuclear weapons and fissile material from North Korea. However, they are not on the same page when it comes to taking military measures to destroy North Korea's nuclear capability. And this obviously has implications for a credible red line on the nuclear issue.

More fundamentally, North Korea is much more than just a threat or a foreign entity to South Korea, unlike the way the Soviet Union had been to the United States. This kind of dual nature of the inter-Korean relationship can be highlighted in responding to Congressman Henry Hyde's pointed appeal to South Korea, “If you need our help, please tell us who your enemy is.” A simple response to that request would be that North Korea, as a monolith, is the enemy of South Korea. However, a more sophisticated answer would be that the North Korean regime is different from the North Korean people, and that a North Korea policy that lumps the two together and inflicts a disproportionate amount of suffering on the people is not desirable. An even more nuanced answer would be to give the North Korean regime a chance to make amends as long as it is willing to engage in “mutual threat reduction,” which was the guiding principle of the Perry process in 1999, when the two allies were able to craft a common North Korea policy. This kind of fundamental difference in the way South Korea views North Korea has to be understood by American policymakers if the two allies are going to be on the same page regarding North Korea policy.

### *China*

As for China, another potential threat, some American observers in recent years have begun to talk about the possibility of a “Korea shift” from the United States to

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<sup>10</sup> In 1994, it was estimated that as many as 1 million people would be killed in the resumption of full-scale war on the Korean peninsula, with the destruction of property and interruption of business activity costing more than \$1 trillion to the countries involved and their immediate neighbors. See Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p.324.

China. For evidence, they point to impressive economic and geopolitical gains China has made in its interaction with South Korea since the normalization of relations in 1992. However, the picture is not so simple, especially in the wake of the controversy over the ancient kingdom of Koguryo.<sup>11</sup> While South Korea would like to maintain a close relationship with China for obvious economic and geopolitical reasons, South Korea also has a strong incentive for hedging and harbors some strategic anxiety regarding China's increasing influence on North Korea. In fact, in South Korea, there is a growing concern that North Korea might become "China's fourth Northeastern province" after Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning if China's economic and geopolitical influence on North Korea continues to increase.<sup>12</sup>

This ambivalence toward China is not very different from the sentiment implicit in the term "congame," the combination of containment and engagement supported by many U.S. policymakers in dealing with China.<sup>13</sup> Although more hawkish policymakers may prefer confrontation, including the formation of a Great Crescent (linking India, Taiwan, and Japan with the U.S.) to contain China, the current mainstream view in the United States seems to place greater emphasis on engagement than containment, avoiding the self-fulfilling prophecy of confrontation with China. South Korea also finds it in its interest to foster cooperation in East Asia and prevent U.S.-China confrontation, which would likely have a very negative effect on the Korean peninsula. In short, although some may simplistically argue that South Korea and the United States have rather different perspectives on China, the difference is not as large as it may first appear. With regard to the potential threat posed by China, the ROK-U.S. alliance can serve as a mutually beneficial insurance.

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<sup>11</sup> With its territory extending from the northern half of the Korean peninsula to Manchuria, the ancient kingdom of Koguryo had the potential to develop into a contentious issue between Korea and China for some time. A major controversy erupted in April 2004 when the Chinese Foreign Ministry deleted references to Koguryo from the Korean history (country profile) section on its Web site ([www.fmprc.gov.cn](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn)). This official Chinese move followed the "academic" activities of the government-sponsored Northeast Project (*dongbei gongcheng*), which had claimed that Koguryo was merely a Chinese vassal state or a Chinese regional province. When South Korea protested, China responded by deleting the entire pre-World War II history of Korea. The only consolation to Koreans was that China was at least fair enough to do the same to Japan. With North Korea becoming increasingly dependent on China, some Koreans interpreted the Chinese action as an attempt to do the historical groundwork to expand its influence into the Korean peninsula. The Chinese could have said that Koguryo was a multi-ethnic ancient kingdom whose rulers were Korean but whose cultural heritage was shared by China and Korea, but, for some unknown reason, the Chinese Foreign Ministry decided to go well beyond that. The Koguryo controversy led many Koreans to take a second look at China. Given China's efforts to present itself as a benign and non-hegemonic power under the slogan of "peaceful rise," the way it handled this delicate issue was something of a surprise, to say the least.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Myung-Chul Cho and Moon-Soo Yang, *The Increase of North Korea's Economic Dependence on China and Its Implications for South Korea* (Seoul: KIEP, 2005) [in Korean].

<sup>13</sup> See Zalmay M. Khalilzad, Abram N. Shulsky, Daniel L. Byman, Roger Cliff, David T. Orletsky, David Shlapak, and Ashley J. Tellis, *The United States and a Rising China: Strategic and Military Implications* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1999), at [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1082/](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1082/). For a recent assessment of the "congame" policy, see Jay Solomon, "U.S. Increasingly Pursues Two-Track China Policy," *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 17, 2005.

A similar statement may be made regarding the Taiwan Strait issue as well. In South Korea, the Taiwan Strait crisis is usually discussed within the context of “strategic flexibility” for the USFK. The nightmare scenario in the minds of many Koreans is the possibility of the ROK being dragged into an unwanted war with China because the USFK would be sent to the Taiwan Strait if a crisis erupts. Some observers have argued that this fear of entrapment is yet another evidence of diverging threat perception between the ROK and the United States.

Again, however, the difference between South Korea and the United States is not as large as it may first appear. Both countries support a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan problem. They are both opposed to unilateral action being taken by either China or Taiwan. Making an analogy with the Korean situation, most Koreans believe that gradual convergence in economic and political systems between China and Taiwan offers the best solution. Although some China hawks in the United States (and Japan) may prefer to keep Taiwan in a state of limbo for geopolitical reasons, most American policymakers are also likely to support the final confirmation of the “one China” principle if it is preceded by China’s democratic transition. Moreover, even if a military conflict did break out in the Taiwan Strait, it is likely that the U.S. forces in Guam and Okinawa, *not* the predominantly ground-based USFK, would be sent to the Strait to resolve the crisis. The nightmare scenario of South Korea getting involved in a war with China over the Taiwan problem is like making a mountain out of a molehill.

That said, it would be prudent for the ROK to have an assurance from the United States that the strategic flexibility of the USFK would not unnecessarily compromise the security of the ROK. In particular, it would be critical for South Korea to have an implied *de facto* veto on the involvement of U.S. troops in a conflict outside the Korean peninsula when they are “operating from,” as opposed to “departing from,” South Korea—that is, moving back and forth from South Korea to intervene in a third-party conflict, putting the lives of the Korean people at risk.

## **2. Economic Interests**

South Korea’s economic development has reduced its dependence on the U.S. and expanded the range of its choices in international relations. Moreover, China’s increasing relative importance to South Korea in economic terms has become unmistakable in recent years. In 1991, the year before South Korea and China normalized relations, China bought only 1.4 percent of South Korea’s exports while the U.S. accounted for 25.8 percent. By 2003, however, China’s share of South Korea’s exports had increased to 18.1 percent while the U.S. share had declined to 17.7 percent. Some American observers have speculated that these economic changes would have a negative impact on the US-ROK alliance. However, a closer look at South Korea’s economic performance and policy suggests that there is no simple causal relationship between South Korea’s economic position and its attitude toward the United States.

Although Koreans appreciated U.S. aid in the 1950s and the early 1960s, some, including Park Chung Hee, were also painfully aware that South Korea’s aid dependence

compromised its sovereignty. As a result, their attitude toward the United States was not one of unqualified gratitude. In particular, when the U.S. used its aid leverage in 1962 to force South Korea's military government to scrap its initial economic development plan and to honor its commitment to restore an elected regime by the next year, Park and his followers began to search for radically different policies that would save them from ever being trapped in a vulnerable position again.<sup>14</sup> Driven by a desire to establish South Korea's economic independence, they adopted an aggressive export-led industrialization strategy.

South Korea averaged an annual growth rate of 8 percent over the subsequent decades, and joined the OECD in 1994. South Korea is now the world's eleventh largest economy. It is also the world's twelfth largest exporter and thirteenth largest importer. In such industries as shipbuilding, electronics, steel, and automobiles, South Korea is one of the top five producers in the world. It also holds the world's fourth largest foreign reserves, after China, Japan, and Taiwan. South Korea's new status as an economic middle power has enabled it to take an active role in regional cooperation in East Asia as well as in multilateral trade negotiations. South Korea has indeed come a long way since the early 1960s when it was an aid-dependent economic basket case. For the United States, South Korea is now the seventh largest trading partner, ahead of such Western European countries as France and Italy; whereas, for South Korea, the United States is the third largest trading partner, after China and Japan.<sup>15</sup>

There is no compelling reason why South Korea's economic development or the declining relative importance of the United States should weaken the bilateral alliance. In fact, South Korea and the U.S. could both appreciate and even celebrate how the strong alliance between the two countries has helped South Korea to make the transition from one of the poorest countries in the world to an economic middle power. No longer lopsided as it was only a few decades ago, economic interaction between the two countries can provide the basis for a solid bilateral relationship.

### **3. Values**

The third binding force in alliance politics is values. Many discussions on the future of the ROK-U.S. alliance these days conclude by saying that the two countries are both democracies and market economies, and therefore they should form a value alliance to strengthen their ties and promote these values around the world. This conclusion is, however, based on a rather superficial reading of shared values, leaving many questions unaddressed.

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<sup>14</sup> See Edward S. Mason, Mahn Je Kim, Dwight H. Perkins, Kwang Suk Kim, and David C. Cole, *The Economic and Social Modernization of the Republic of Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp.196-7.

<sup>15</sup> For a good overview of this bilateral economic relationship, see Mark E. Manyin, "South Korea-U.S. Economic Relations: Cooperation, Friction, and Prospects for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA)," updated Feb. 9, 2006, CRS Report for Congress, RL 30566.



Certainly, not only does American pop culture have a strong appeal in South Korea, but also fundamental values such as democracy and Christianity find broad acceptance, due in part to the historical fact that Korea was victimized by Japanese, rather than Western, imperialism. By contrast, China and other Asian countries that suffered from Western imperialism tend to have a more skeptical view of Western ideas. Also, compared with Japan, which has sought to combine Western technology with the Japanese ethos, South Korea has been less fixated on maintaining its own ethos.

However, South Korea's openness to Western ideas and its status as a democratic market economy do not necessarily mean that these attributes will be the new binding force for the ROK-U.S. alliance, because although the values the two allies are pursuing may be quite similar, the policy tools implemented to realize these values are rather different. In fact, significant philosophical differences between the two allies seem to provide the basis for divergent policy approaches toward North Korea and beyond.

High-ranking officials in the Bush Administration appear to subscribe to a Manichean world view, as indicated by Vice President Dick Cheney's widely cited comment on North Korea policy: "We don't negotiate with evil; we defeat it." Many officials in the Bush Administration, especially those who were opposed to détente during the Cold War, seem to prefer a much tougher approach toward North Korea and other "rogue states." 9/11 reinforced their tendency to see international politics as a struggle between good and evil, and to play on American anger and anxiety.

By contrast, many in Seoul believe that, to the extent that interaction with the outside world promotes change, it makes sense to engage even a bad regime. They think it makes sense to offer an early taste of benefits from engagement when there is mutual distrust.<sup>16</sup> In their view, when the regime is controlling access to its people and the only viable means of improving the lot of the people is through interaction with the regime, the best among the limited policy options is to engage the regime and promote change through increased people-to-people interaction.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> There are three major rationales for inter-Korean economic cooperation. First, inter-Korean economic cooperation would help North Korea to see a way out its current predicament as a rogue state. Through economic exchanges, North Korea would be able to earn money the old-fashioned way rather than through questionable transactions involving counterfeiting, narcotics or weapons. Also, by helping North Korea to get accustomed to market principles, inter-Korean economic cooperation would have the effect of facilitating and consolidating North Korea's economic reform. Second, it would help South Korea to undertake industrial restructuring in a less painful manner. In particular, South Korean firms in the labor-intensive manufacturing sector face increasing competition from China and other late-developing countries, and given North Korea's willingness to experiment with special economic zones, they may find investment in North Korea a viable option. Third, inter-Korean economic cooperation would have the strategic significance of counterbalancing China's increasing influence on North Korea. Each of these developments would facilitate inter-Korean economic integration and help to ensure a relatively smooth transition to reunification.

<sup>17</sup> See Wonhyuk Lim, "When in Doubt, Blame South Korea: The Politics of Food Aid to North Korea," Policy Forum Online 06-13A, Feb. 16, 2006, at <http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/0613Lim.html>.

This difference between Seoul and Washington in philosophical orientation and policy approach is real and far from being resolved. Of course, it was not always this way. Policy coordination between Seoul and Washington was quite good when the Senior Bush Administration, subscribing to orthodox conservatism, made initial efforts to bring the Cold War to an end in East Asia as well as in Europe, or when the Clinton Administration pursued a policy of engagement and enlargement.

The current difference between Seoul and Washington goes beyond North Korea policy. Under the second Bush Administration, democracy promotion has emerged as a foreign policy doctrine, as alluded to in President George W. Bush's speech in Kyoto last November.<sup>18</sup> It is certainly not the first time that a U.S. Administration is linking democracy promotion with peace and security.<sup>19</sup> What is unusual about the Bush Administration is the extent to which it has been willing to resort to military force and unilateralism to transplant democracy. However, there is more than a good chance that the aggressive application of the democratic peace hypothesis (that is, waging war to create democracies to secure peace because democracies are supposed to be peace-loving) may actually lead to an outburst of nationalism, as such a military venture may be perceived as a thinly veiled imperialist exercise. In a heterogeneous, but not pluralistic, society, it may precipitate sectarian violence, as seen in Iraq today.

South Korea's use of force to promote democracy abroad tends to be much more modest. In 1999, South Korea sent combat troops to East Timor to stabilize the situation after its referendum on independence. At that time, South Korea had domestic support, local support from the people of East Timor, as well as international support in the form of a U.N. peacekeeping force. Although the South Korean government did send combat troops to Iraq despite popular protest, there is a limit to how far South Korea would go along with this kind of ill-conceived military venture in the future, because it tends to prefer the policy combination of "peaceful coexistence" and "change through rapprochement" rather than *de novo* democracy creation through regime change.

#### **4. "Goodwill" and Domestic Politics**

In recent years, an increasing concern about the spread of "anti-Americanism" in South Korea has dominated discussions on the future of the ROK-U.S. alliance. This phenomenon has been linked to the rise of "the 386 generation" with a very different formative experience from that of their parents.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> In his speech, President Bush stated: "... the best way to strengthen the ties of trust between nations is by advancing freedom within nations. Free nations are peaceful nations, free nations do not threaten their neighbors, and free nations offer their citizens a hopeful vision for the future." Although the strong or monadic form of the democratic peace hypothesis (that democracies tend to be peaceful in general) provides an intellectual basis for such a statement, its theoretical and empirical foundation is rather weak.

<sup>19</sup> In his 1994 State of the Union Address, President Bill Clinton declared: "Ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere. Democracies don't attack each other." This is the weak or dyadic form of the democratic peace hypothesis (that democracies tend to be peaceful with each other).

<sup>20</sup> The Kwangju Massacre of May 1980 and the successful Democratic Uprising of June 1987 constituted the formative experience of "the 386 generation." Although the tumultuous 1980s in South Korea could be

What exactly is “anti-Americanism” in South Korea? Possibilities are: (1) rejection of everything associated with America, as in the case of “anti-Semitism”; (2) opposition to specific American policies (past support for military dictatorship, hard-line stance on North Korea, etc.); (3) general anger at the U.S. for not sufficiently “respecting” South Korea, combined with opposition to specific American policies. Those familiar with South Korea would agree that (3) best captures the meaning of “anti-Americanism” in South Korea—or, more accurately, “anti-American sentiment.”<sup>21</sup> This sentiment should neither be elevated as an “ism” nor downgraded merely as a negative response to specific policies.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to resolving policy differences with the United States, the psychological challenge for South Korea is to overcome its parochialism and “periphery complex” and begin to act and behave like a middle power. The slogan of “the Great Republic of Korea standing tall” may have a great emotional appeal to the electorate in South Korea, but it cannot substitute for a good policy. The challenge for the United States is to accept South Korea as a middle power. There is a sense that the more South Korea becomes like the U.S., the less the U.S. likes South Korea. This needs to be reversed. Accompanying technical adjustments will have to be made regarding the structure of the Combined Forces Command, SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement), and operational control.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, the allies should pay close attention to changing domestic politics in the two countries. A number of observers have noted that while the United States is becoming more conservative, South Korea is becoming more progressive. However, what is happening in South Korea is much more profound than a simple swing of political sentiments. It is actually an expansion of the political spectrum—or, more accurately, restoration of the political left in South Korea. In the wake of the Korean War, not only communists but those who may be classified as social democrats or even nationalists were purged in South Korea, and now this restoration is taking place. There is going to be a lot of revisionist history and taboo-breaking, and there is a chance that

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compared with the 1960s in the United States, its happier ending helped to put the young leaders of the pro-democracy movement in better position to effect significant changes in society.

<sup>21</sup> See William Watts, “Next Generation Leaders in the Republic of Korea: Opinion Survey Report and Analysis,” Potomac Associates, April 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Anti-American sentiment was prominent in 2002. In the summer of that year, a U.S. armored vehicle accidentally killed two South Korean middle school girls. When the driver and navigator of the vehicle were both acquitted in a U.S. court martial despite their conflicting statements, hundreds of thousands of South Koreans took to the streets demanding President Bush’s apology. Unlike in the past, they were no longer willing to give U.S. military personnel a free pass for the sake of “national security.” Later in 2002, Seoul and Washington had a major disagreement on North Korea policy, and the Bush Administration’s rhetoric of leaving “all options on the table” further alienated the South Korean public.

<sup>23</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see Park Kun Young, “A New U.S.-ROK Alliance: A Nine-Point Policy Recommendation for a Reflective and Mature Partnership,” CNAPS Working Paper, Brookings Institution, 2005, at <http://www.brookings.edu/fp/cnaps/papers/park20050907.htm>.

greater publicity for new, iconoclastic views would have a negative impact on the ROK-U.S. alliance.

The recent controversy over the MacArthur statue in Incheon is a case in point. Although a great majority of the Korean people were opposed to the removal of the statute, the ones who attracted the most attention were exactly those who called Douglas MacArthur “a war criminal” and demanded the removal of his statue. Their view might have been quite sensational, but it certainly was not representative of public opinion in South Korea. American policymakers should not accord to such a view more weight than it deserves.

## **5. Conclusion**

To sum up, I'd like to make three points. (1) South Korea's industrialization and democratization, in conjunction with changing geopolitical realities in Northeast Asia, have rendered obsolete many of the basic premises underpinning its asymmetric Cold War alliance with the United States. From a comparative perspective, the transformation of the ROK-U.S. alliance is rather unique in that the economic and political success of the client state is providing a major impetus for the change and that this transformation is taking place in the absence of a shared strategic vision. This presents significant psychological and strategic challenges for the two allies. (2) On the psychological front, solutions appear to be straightforward. South Korea should overcome its parochialism and “periphery complex” and begin to act and behave like a middle power, and the United States should treat South Korea like a middle power. To craft a more equal partnership, the two allies should work together to make technical adjustments in the structure of the Combined Forces Command, SOFA, and operational control. (3) On the strategic front, solutions are less clear-cut. Although divergences in threat perception regarding North Korea and China are not as great as they may first appear, the relative weight South Korea and the United States would place on military options as opposed to diplomatic measures is quite different. South Korea subscribes to the logic of deterrence and prefers the policy combination of “peaceful coexistence” and “change through rapprochement”; whereas, the United States under the Bush Administration seems willing to take much more coercive measures to bring about change under the doctrine of “democracy promotion.” Until the United States reins in neoconservative impulses and returns to its realist policies of the past, it is likely to have a difficult time crafting a shared strategic vision with South Korea, as it would with its allies in Europe.

Crafting a shared strategic vision itself would be a challenge in Northeast Asia. There appear to be basically two options for the U.S., depending on what kind of relationship with China it envisions. One is to place South Korea within a hub-and-spoke alliance against China, using the North Korean nuclear crisis as a catalyst. This policy is, however, likely to find little support in South Korea and risk a nationalist backlash if the U.S. is increasingly viewed as an impediment to Korean reunification and regional security. It would also increase the possibility of a “Korea shift” and exacerbate a continental-maritime division in Northeast Asia. In fact, even if the U.S. objective were to prolong tension in the region and contain China, its hard-line policy toward North

Korea would likely be counterproductive, for that would only help China to expand its influence in the Korean peninsula. The United States would find itself increasingly tied to Japan, whose reluctance to come to terms with its imperialist past has limited the effectiveness of its diplomacy. Under this strategic vision, the U.S. essentially risks “losing” the Korean peninsula in order to cement its relationship with Japan and contain China. Although this vision would not only endanger the ROK-U.S. alliance but also likely increase tension in Northeast Asia, some American scholars and practitioners appear resigned to, or even comfortable with, this prospect.

The other alternative is to deal with South Korea on more equal terms and engage it as a partner in building a new order in the region, facilitating China’s gradual transition and resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis to end the Cold War in Northeast Asia. This alternative would require the U.S. to be more “equidistant” between China and Japan, consistently signaling to China that the existing U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea are not designed to threaten China. At the same time, the United States would also have to reassure Japan that this policy is not “Japan passing.” The U.S. would assume the role of a stabilizer in Northeast Asia, much as it does in Europe. This approach would not only strengthen the U.S. position in the Korean peninsula but also enhance its policy options in dealing with China and Japan. It would also have the effect of encouraging Japan to improve relations with its neighbors. Under this vision, South Korea would play the role of an advocate for cooperation in the region, not a balancer in the neorealist sense of the term. South Korea is likely to support such a shift in U.S. policy, for the last thing it wants is a continental-maritime division in Northeast Asia that would greatly complicate Korean reunification and increase tension in the region. This strategic vision would not only serve the interest of the ROK-U.S. alliance but also enhance regional security.