

# Ambivalences in the South Korean National Security:

## AN EVALUATION OF THE US-KOREA SECURITY ALLIANCE

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that there are ambivalences in the South Korean concept of national security. I attribute these weaknesses to the complex task of forming a national security doctrine, which entails a high level of multi-actor coordination with its ally the United States. I divide the factors contributing to these weaknesses in two broad categories: Organizational and Fundamental.

Under the rubric “organizational,” I include those problems in the U.S.– Korean alliance, which stem from the administrative difficulty of coordinating close positions between the governments of the Republic of Korea and the United States. These include the challenges that have arisen from the changing political situations in the two countries – the change of administrations in the U.S. and the rapid democratization of South Korea. As the present year has shown, these changes can be burdensome to the actors involved in the stewardship of the security on the Korean peninsula, as these actors strive to recognize the inevitable consequences of domestic political changes and their bearing on allied coordination. These organizational obstacles, while capable of creating temporary crisis of trust between the allies, are however inherent to the nature of slow-changing security alliances which, like the U.S.-ROK alliance,

have a legacy of bilateral historical commitment. I argue that, paradoxically, these potentially undermining obstacles in fact arise from the deep commitment of the allies to structural hazard within that alliance.

In contrast, under the rubric of historical factors, I highlight some fundamental and entrenched differences in outlook between the ROK and the United States.<sup>1</sup> These concern subtle differences in the goals of the alliance, as well as differences in the attitude toward North Korea. As a sign of these differences, the firm commitment of President Bush to National Missile Defense (NMD) is shown to be inimical to the sunshine policy of President Kim Dae-Jung and to have potentially destabilizing effects on the Korean peninsula. Having reviewed these, we show how these weaknesses can impede rapprochement and re-unification policies.

### ORGANIZATIONAL WEAKNESSES

This past year has shown that the ROK-US security alliance suffers from an inability to recognize, anticipate and flexibly respond to the changes in domestic political environment in both countries. The results have been rather worrying. The Bush administration’s Korean policy is now universally perceived as “hardened” and in sharp discontinuity with the

<sup>1</sup>We concede that the two types of factors may overlap in many instances. As we explore here, during the crisis of the summer of 1994, the “structural” difficulties of coordination between the U.S. and the ROK were exacerbated by the more fundamental differences in their approaches toward North Korea.

Clinton's administration willingness to negotiate directly with North Korea, while being sensitive to South Korean concerns of undue legitimization of the DPRK's regime by the U.S. Perhaps more surprisingly, the recent hardening has been perceived as a change in position not only to the DPRK but also the ROK itself. Formal commitments and declarations remain fully in place, yet the South Korean establishment has perceived a U.S. tendency to bypass its ally in its resolve to change the tone in its dealings with the Kim

commitment and common goals, tarnished the domestic image of President Kim and called into question the effectiveness of his sunshine policy of engagement. The already high degree of democratization in the ROK makes its politicians, to a historically unprecedented level, captives of popular opinion. Therefore, the U.S. has remained insensitive to the fact that there is a new actor, which must contribute to the maintaining of U.S.-Korea security alliance – public opinion. President Bush's perceived ambiguity and lack of sensitivity has also served to spur already rising hostility toward the U.S. in sections of the South Korean population.

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None of these developments in the past year has been positive. The rapprochement of 2000 seems to have been followed by the chilliness of 2001, mostly driven by the new American administration. Yet, there is a way in which this negativity can be downplayed. It is in the nature of every new administration to review its foreign policies and some pundits have argued that it is rather more worrying if such a review is not conducted.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the new policy review, completed in late spring, has strongly endorsed continuing talks with the DPRK. Thus, with U.S. commitment to dialogue intact, it is more plausible to accept the frictions of the past year partly as an inevitability accompanying the need for policy review and the change of policy makers.

Jong-Il regime. A series of remarks by President Bush, first in March in Washington, D.C. and most recently in October 2001 in Shanghai, depicting Mr. Kim Jong-Il as untrustworthy, have not been coordinated with the South Korean government. The direct upshot of these remarks has been a cancellation by the DPRK delegation of the regularly scheduled meetings with its South Korean counterparts in Seoul. Another result has been the resumption of virulent and familiar attacks against the U.S. in the North Korean media. Thus, the change in Washington has directly impacted South-North dialogue, putting into question the commitments to negotiation laid down in the Basic Agreement and arresting the impetus coming from the historic Kim-Kim summit of 2000.

In this sense, disappointments are to be seen in part as the attempt of the complexly coordinated security structure of the U.S.-Korean alliance to accommodate political changes that come as an inescapable part of democratic processes. Indeed, had it not been so, the alliance would have become a platitude maintained more by historical legacy than genuine domestic support in both countries. In this light, even rising discontent within the ROK as a reaction to recent developments is to be seen as a positive step in the process of true democratic endorsement of the feasibility of the U.S.-ROK alliance – a process, which is ultimately healthy for the fledgling Korean democracy.

The new U.S. administration has also been oblivious to the impact of these policy changes on the South Korean domestic political scene. The hastily arranged summit on March 7 between President Bush and President Kim, for all the formal repetition of

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<sup>2</sup> “The Perils of Progress: The U.S. – South Korean Alliance in a Changing Environment” Che, Glosserman, Pacific Forum CSIS Conference, 2001

However, such an “organizational” explanation is applicable to the temporary crises between the two allies, and does not account for fundamental divergences between the two allies. One such rarely explored difference exists between the attitudes of the two allies toward North Korea.

#### *FUNDAMENTAL FACTORS*

##### **DPRK - Irrationality or Malicious intent?**

In the past decade, there has emerged a clear dichotomy between U.S. and South Korean views toward North Korea. The difference between the terms above, for policy considerations, consists in the fact that the U.S. views the DPRK as an irrational, or rogue state, which would not be constrained by the absolute certainty of a devastating retaliatory strike, and thus would be free to “irrationally” launch a pre-emptive attack. On the other hand, what we call here “malicious intent” merely expresses South Korean mistrust for the DPRK regime. Such an attitude, however, affirms that deterrence is fully applicable, and thus denies that the DPRK is irrational. This divergence has in times of crises beset smooth ROK–US coordination and resulted in the 1994 major threat of a new Korean War.

##### **Historical evolution of the two views toward North Korea**

The attitude of South Korea toward North Korea has roughly followed the trend of the relative economic power of South Korea measured against the North. Thus, while the command economy in the DPRK was creating double-digit growth in the 1960s and early 1970s, the ROK dismissed any initiatives by Kim Il-Sung aimed at establishing close ties because it feared absorption and an inability to counteract the North economically and ideologically. With the start of the decline of the North’s economy, and the economic successes of the Park Chung Hee’s regime,

South Korea became more confident in proposing re-unification formulae, to which it was not committed but which allowed it to wield the image of an active party. Ever since, it has assumed the tactic of rejecting the North’s proposal and then announcing an almost identical proposal. Although such maneuverings, backed by its awareness of its much greater economic advantage, have allowed the ROK to externally appear as an initiator of negotiations, they are also indicative of a deeply held mistrust toward the DPRK and of the conviction that its regime is malicious. These suspicions have, over the years, been vindicated by the well-documented North Korean pursuit of terrorism, spy infiltration and provocation.

The United States, for its part, views North Korea’s regime within its own security lenses – as a rogue state and an irrational regime. This concept has not occurred spontaneously in recent years but has a historical evolution. Starting in the late 1980’s, the DPRK started losing the economic and ideological support of the cash-strapped Soviet Union and the markets of the disintegrating Comecon.<sup>3</sup> After the final collapse of the Soviet Union, it was left on its own, with only China continuing to be a formal, yet weary and uncommitted, ally. Soon after the DPRK lost the support of a major nuclear power, U.S. policy makers changed their attitude toward the North. They substituted their previous constraint in dealing with the North, which always involved substantial consultations with the South, for a more brisk, hardened and peremptory approach. The surprising thaw in US–DPRK relations in 1991 – 1992, which resulted in the cancellation of the yearly Team Spirit exercise in South Korea, as a good will gesture by the ROK and the U.S., was soon reversed and the US policy hardened further. When the light-water reactor crisis of 1993–1994 broke out, the US started viewing and officially labeling North Korea an “irrational” regime and a “rogue nation.” While the perception of “irrationality” was based on uncorroborated assumptions of the DPRK’s

<sup>3</sup> Comecon – Council of mutual economic assistance was a common market, under the auspices of the USSR that linked the socialist countries in Eastern Europe and beyond.

intentions to build nuclear warheads to be installed on long-range missiles, the hawkish and unchecked policy of intimidation by the U.S. soon resulted in truly irrational statements by the beleaguered and increasingly resourceless DPRK regime. However, even after the favorable resolution of the crisis and the creation of the Agreed Framework, perceptions of the North's irrationality and undependability have persisted. Thus, the views of South Korea and its US ally toward North Korea are quite different. While the ROK believes that the North is a well-calculating but malicious regime, the U.S. to this day adheres to the idea that it is an irrational government, capable of launching itself into a self-destructive war. This divergence of views has been clearly demonstrated by the nuclear crisis of 1994-1995. The end of the Cold War inclined the DPRK to search for desperate bargaining chips, such as the Yongbyong nuclear reactor, as a substitute for the negotiation power that it was rapidly losing. The collapse of the nuclear balance in the world thus revealed the divergence between the views of the ROK and the U.S. governments toward the North for several reasons:

- 1) The regime of Kim Il-Sung was more likely to act desperately to gain bargaining power. Sharply deteriorating economic conditions, international isolation and signs of a possible rift between the political leadership and the military, propelled the North to act in a reckless manner.
- 2) These acts had a high likelihood of being construed by the U.S. establishment as, indeed, irrational acts. The intelligence and military circles have in turn frequently amplified the magnitude of the danger from the North. This self-perpetuated psychological factor and unchecked policy toward the DPRK propelled the U.S. in 1994 to the verge of a decision with grave consequences.

- 3) The emboldened policy of Washington has not always resonated well in Seoul, where the regime is well aware that brinkmanship from the U.S. may lead to a devastating war. The governments in Seoul have so far not subscribed to the Washington view of North Korea as irrational. However, analysts of the Korean peninsula are keenly aware that any desperate and high-risk maneuverings of the North, however well-calculated they are, may gain a momentum of its own and lead to "irrational decisions," if they have to be made under conditions of great stress, such as the possibility of an imminent strike by the U.S.<sup>4</sup> Pyongyang's June 1994 threat to turn Seoul into "a sea of flames," in retaliation for U.S. sanctions, while predictably upsetting to the South, did not deter high-level U.S. preparations for a conflict.

*NATIONAL MISSILE DEFENSE- A FURTHER SIGN OF US-R.O.K. DIVERGENCE*

It is exactly these perceptions that initially prompted the Senate to investigate the DPRK's capability to sustain a program of building the long-range Taepo-Dong missile. Ultimately, this belief in irrationality has fueled the now concrete designs for National Missile Defense. If this "irrationality" component in U.S. strategic thinking were removed, and the U.S. started viewing the DPRK as a rational agent, the military justification for the NMD would fall apart. As it is, the concept of NMD is viewed very cautiously and with reserves by the ROK, as it fears that such a move will antagonize the DPRK. Moreover, President Kim has formally declared its support for the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which is the principle legal hurdle for the installation of a National Missile Defense. Immediately before meeting Bush, Kim signed a joint

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Russett, "Pearl Harbor: Deterrence Theory," believe that the DPRK is either capable of or committed to an irrational inter-continental missile attack against the U.S.

communicate with President Putin on the importance of adhering to this treaty. However, as of December 2001, Russia itself seemed to be conceding that the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972 should be dismantled. If this treaty is indeed invalidated, President Kim may be further discredited both in the eyes of the domestic public and within the circles of U.S. policy makers. South Korea has adamantly opposed NMD for the reason that it may compel the North, which is the main pretext for the building of the system, to assume an offensive posture. Furthermore, as already discussed, the ROK government does not believe that the DPRK is either capable of or committed to an irrational inter-continental missile attack against the U.S.

### **Explanations for the divergence in outlooks**

The first explanation is an “external” one. It posits that divergence between the ROK and its ally the U.S. is in fact accounted for by the relationship between ROK and the DPRK. In this sense, an occasionally inconsistent attitude of the South Korean government toward its U.S. ally is called for by the great mistrust that still exists between the North and the South. Although to Seoul a Korean reunification is highly desirable as a result of a treaty, which, while endorsed by China and the U.S., is a genuinely inter-Korean achievement, this self-reliance in matters political does not translate into a genuinely own national security conception. The lingering suspicion in Seoul about the intentions of the Pyongyang regime makes the continued deployment of U.S. troops a certainty for the foreseeable future. This reliance on the U.S. in turn raises concerns among the North Korean leadership. Confirming this lack of faith, the DPRK has not indicated that it has completely abandoned its old practices of spy infiltration, troop provocations and armament violation in the Demilitarized Zone. Over the decades, actions big and small have effectively undermined the possibility of genuine trust between the two

governments, in spite of the commonly declared vision of a reunified country. It is through this mechanism that genuine belief in a unified country coexists with no less genuine mistrust that, the Kim-Kim summit notwithstanding, has made any progress in relations merely declaratory and void of any real substance.

This self-perpetuating cycle of wishful thinking, unmatched by political courage to overcome mistrust, does not point to clear and easy solutions. The basic security ambivalence could be only converted into resolve for negotiations and good will for concessions in the presence of a remarkably changed external factor, such as an unexpected thaw in the attitude of the Bush administration toward North Korea. Such a thaw is unlikely to come soon. Indeed, as already mentioned, diplomatic reality clearly imposes on the U.S. the need for continued dialogue with the DPRK. However, a rise in contacts is not expected to be sudden, and as history shows, the DPRK regime is peculiar in that it gives equal or greater importance to gestures and reiteration of promises more so than to formally laid down commitments.

The second explanation points to inherent differences in security conceptions between the ROK and the U.S. In spite of being allies, the ROK and the U.S. have had their own preferences and agendas. The fact that their security strategies meet in the same focal point – peace at the DMZ – should not be construed as resulting from a completely overlapping set of preferences and goals. Ultimately, these divergences stem from the differences in the perception of the danger and, even more so, from the distinct evaluations of the security in the region. No doubt some of them arise from the sheer physical distance between the two sets of decision-makers. Placed in different contexts, the two governments have had dissimilar views on the security environment. While plausible, however, such explanation does not fully account for all divergences between ROK and US conceptions of security. We propose that these likely stem from divergent sets of

values, also historically conditioned by differences in the way the two countries have experienced the past fifty years in Northeast Asia.

American officers divided Korea and then fought a now forgotten war.<sup>5</sup> Later, in the context of a global ideological confrontation, the Korean peninsula was strategically important, yet only so placed in the global standoff between the two superpowers. Therefore, there is a different hierarchy of priorities for the two allies. Thus, the Korean peninsula has historically been important as a constitutive piece of the global order. There is a case to be made that the U.S. has not viewed Korea wholly as an intrinsically valuable partner, but only so as an instrumental means. Said differently, ever since 1950, Korea has held a strategically important place on the U.S. security agenda only looked at from the global viewpoint of a superpower. Understandably, for South Korea, the priorities run in the opposite direction – from the regional to the global level, the greatest concern being the protection of its sovereignty. Thus, peace at the DMZ and eventual reunification may be common goals for the allies, it is the geo-strategic ordering of priorities that accounts for divergences in outlooks.

Finally, while the U.S. did take responsibility for South Korea, it has never genuinely examined its role in the creation of the problem itself. The U.S. was responsible for the arbitrary division of the country along an imaginary line. Furthermore, some scholars have argued that the U.S. should have remained composed in the face of North Korean provocations along the border in 1950, and that, once war broke, it should have remained outside of the conflict.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. has also never explicitly delineated the extent of its condoning of the Kwangju massacre of May 1980. Even if historical responsibility may be no longer relevant, a certainly grave U.S. mistake has been that, in the light of its engagement, it did not stop viewing its Korean

involvement as merely a part of its global security doctrine.

With a globally worsened security situation, there are slim chances of a U.S. withdrawal in the near future. The administration can and should try to remedy the problems in its alliance with the ROK. The U.S. must show greater sensitivity to ROK concerns and willingness for dialogue with the DPRK. Now that the Bush administration has shown that it is capable of forging its own East Asian policy, the time has come to capitalize on and continue the successes of the previous administration in its insistence on dialogue rather than confrontation.

There are inescapable points of friction between the two allies, as has been shown. Some of them inhere in the structure of the alliance and others are more fundamental. These asymmetries need not, however, become fatal for the future of the alliance. A helpful strategy would be a joint security vision, whereby it is explicitly recognized that the U.S. forces will not be permanently stationed on the peninsula. Rather than adhere to strict timetables, which in an uncertain security situation is not helpful, a conditionality principle may be evoked, whereby the U.S. explicitly recognizes a gradual end of mandate for its forces should reunification proceeds peacefully. What is necessary, therefore, is that the U.S. “empathizes” with its partner by approaching the particular concerns that the ROK has from a regional, and not only global, perspective. In order for the alliance to ultimately fulfill its roles – continued peace and reunification – commitment must be enhanced by sensitivity. Lack of sensitivity and understanding may not kill the alliance, as there will continue to be overriding military justification for its continuation. However, in an atmosphere of reduced trust, the U.S.–ROK alliance will merely perpetuate itself without making possible those conditions for peace and reunification, which must be its ultimate goals.

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<sup>5</sup> Colonels Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel took 30 minutes to divide the country on August 10, 1945, without consulting Koreans and with the tacit approval of Moscow. Cumings 1997 Bruce Cumings, “Korea’s Place in the Sun,” 1997

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Cumings, “Korea’s Place in the Sun,” 1997