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SPECIAL ASSESSMENT

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The Asia-Pacific and the United States 2004–2005

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ROK and the United States 2004–2005: Managing Perception Gaps?

L T C D A V I D W . S H I N

K E Y F I N D I N G S

- 1 South Korean society has polarized over the last two years. The country's conservatives and "progressives" are struggling to define Korea's vision for the future, including relations with the U.S. Recent polls show most South Koreans still value the U.S.-ROK alliance. However, many seem to perceive that the U.S. has historically treated South Korea unequally.
- 1 Most South Koreans acknowledge the tension within the U.S.-ROK alliance. Many believe the upcoming Security Policy Initiative (SPI) will be a great opportunity to rejuvenate the alliance. Some feel that for SPI to be successful, it will require presidential-level involvement from both countries.
- 1 China remains an important factor in South Korea's strategic calculations. The Roh administration was initially viewed as leaning toward China. However, competing Chinese and Korean interpretations of an ancient historical question have chilled "China Fever" in Korea. The net effect has been to highlight the utility and importance of the alliance with the U.S.
- 1 South Koreans are concerned about efforts to expand the U.S.-Japan security alliance. Many believe the pace of change in Japan's security posture is too fast and fear that its status as America's most important ally in the Asia-Pacific comes at Korea's expense. South Korea is therefore unlikely to embrace efforts to enhance U.S.-Japan-ROK security cooperation. This seems in part because of Japan's historical legacy, but also because Korea does not want to unnecessarily antagonize China.
- 1 Only a minority of South Koreans believes there is a possibility that North Korea will launch a full-scale attack. However, nearly half still view North Korea as a threat. In fact, more than 60 percent agree that U.S. forces should remain in Korea long-term, and 93 percent indicated the relationship was important to South Korea's national interest.

INTRODUCTION

During the recent Future of the Alliance (FOTA) talks, representatives of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and U.S. governments agreed to a land return deal that will allow U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK) to consolidate all its forces onto two major hubs south of Seoul. Approximately 34,000 troops are currently dispersed across 41 major installations, including Yongsan Army Garrison in downtown Seoul. Base consolidation increases the USFK's ability to rapidly reinforce the peninsula, while reducing encroachment near densely populated urban areas. This is a win-win solution that benefits both countries. USFK also plans to incrementally remove 12,500 troops between 2004 and 2008 as part of the U.S. Global Defense Posture Review. In this regard, the two allies successfully resolved many lingering legacy issues as well as adjustments resulting from the current international security environment. However, other important issues remain unresolved and many challenges lie ahead in 2005. The two allies have yet to define the vision for the future and a corresponding strategy to make that vision operational. In addition, the rise of the progressives in South Korean politics has polarized South Korean society, which appears to have widened the "perception gap" between the two allies concerning perceived U.S. unilateralism, the expanding U.S.-Japan security alliance, North Korea, China and anti-American sentiment.

IMPEACHMENT AND DOMESTIC POLARIZATION

In the midst of the Global War on Terrorism and U.S.-ROK alliance transformation, South Korean politics experienced unprecedented events during 2004. For the first time in Korea's history, the National Assembly impeached its President. The impeachment demonstrated the extent of domestic polarization in South Korea between the rising progressives and the entrenched conservatives. The impeachment sparked widespread protests throughout the country and President Roh Moo-Hyun was eventually suspended from office for two months until the Constitutional Court ruled to reinstate him. The negative public reaction to the impeachment propelled his party into the majority in the April 2004 general elections. For the first time in Korea's modern history, progressives formed the majority in the National Assembly. However, in October 2004, South Korea's Constitutional Court challenged President Roh's authority by declaring his plan to relocate the country's capital from Seoul to the Yeongi-Gongju area unconstitutional. Roh had said publicly that he would consider opposition to his capital relocation plan as a rejection of his administration.

Another challenge for President Roh surfaced earlier in the year when Kim Sun-il, a South Korean translator, was kidnapped and later killed by Iraqi insurgents in June 2004 after the Korean government refused to accept their demand to withdraw its commitment to deploy additional troops to Iraq. South Korean television showed images of Kim begging for his life and the news of his beheading shocked the country, fueling intense

debate over the additional troop deployment. Amid this controversy, South Korea deployed approximately 3,600 soldiers to the northern Iraqi city of Irbil by November 2004. The deployment made South Korea the third largest coalition partner in Iraq. Many believe this show of support for the U.S. has helped to improve relations between the two allies. In December 2004, the National Assembly ratified a bill to extend the troop deployment for another year. However, the National Assembly failed to compromise on the progressive party's efforts to repeal the National Security Law, revise the newspaper industry law and reform private schools by the end of 2004. This signals another tough year for Korean politics in 2005.

KOREA'S DEMOCRATIZATION AND THE ALLIANCE

The maturation of South Korea's democracy has resulted in an open struggle between the conservative and progressive parties to define Korea's vision for the future by debating its past, including the relationship with the U.S. Although many have indicated that there are current tensions in the relationship, most ROK officials and analysts seem to value the U.S.-ROK alliance. South Korea's popular sentiment, measured in a number of polls, appears to mirror this assessment. However, another opinion poll conducted by the Joongang Daily in October 2004, indicated 49 percent of all respondents viewed relations with the U.S. as having "worsened slightly" during the past two to three years, and 18 percent believed they had "worsened considerably." Only 23 percent believed they had "improved slightly" over that period. Judging by this alone, one could conclude, as some have, that anti-American sentiment has increased significantly. Nevertheless, the same poll also revealed that most Koreans still viewed the U.S.-ROK relationship as "important." In fact, 57 percent of the respondents viewed maintaining good relations with the U.S. as "fairly important" and another 36 percent felt it was "very important." A somewhat surprising result is that none of the respondents felt it was "not important at all" to maintain good relations with the U.S. In short, the polarization of Korean society has highlighted the existing tensions in the relationship, but most Koreans still seem to value the U.S.-ROK alliance.

There is, however, a growing perception that the U.S. has historically mistreated Korea through unilateralism and unequal treatment, and that has become semi-official mantra in South Korea's policy circles. South Koreans cite many examples, including U.S. failure to intervene during the 1980 Kwangju massacre, unilateral U.S. decisions to withdraw its troops, and more recently, perceived U.S. pressure to purchase outdated U.S. military equipment, the accidental death of two middle school girls in 2002 and disputes over gold medals during the 2002 Winter and 2004 Summer Olympics. The U.S. has been mindful of Korean sentiments. A recent visit to the Kwangju Pro-Democracy Memorial by Christopher Hill, the U.S. Ambassador to Seoul, appears to have sent the right message and won over many South Koreans.

FOTA AND SPI

After almost two years of FOTA negotiations, the two sides have agreed to reduce the U.S. footprint in South Korea by two-thirds and U.S. troops by a one-third. On 9 December 2004, the South Korean National Assembly finally approved the bill for the Yongsan relocation and the amended Land Partnership Plan (LPP). In January 2005, South Korea announced it was authorizing approximately \$477 million to prepare for USFK realignment. This paves the way for the Korean government to purchase the land to implement the realignment. USFK also began transferring some of its missions, such as Joint Security Area (JSA) security, to South Korean forces in October 2004, and a total of ten missions will be transferred to Korea by 2006. This indicates a significant change in the relative responsibilities between U.S. and South Korean forces, and recognizes Korea's desire to have a leading role in its own defense. To address South Korean concerns of a potential "security vacuum" resulting from USFK troop reductions, the U.S. has committed \$11 billion to enhance its capabilities that will directly benefit the collective defense of the Republic of Korea.

Nevertheless, some in South Korea still wonder about the meaning of USFK reductions and worry that the U.S. may be losing its focus on deterring North Korea. As the FOTA talks transition to SPI talks in February 2005, South Koreans appear to be developing a more cautious approach to the talks. Their initial priority appears to be gaining U.S. assurances that USFK will remain focused on North Korea. Many Korean officials also seem to avoid detailed discussions about possible regional roles for USFK, and suggest that an ambiguous regional role for USFK is necessary to de-politicize the issue. What seems to be clear is that USFK involvement in the Taiwan Strait is problematic, if not unacceptable, to South Korea. Moreover, when USFK deploys to fulfill its regional roles, some feel that additional U.S. forces should flow in to maintain credible deterrence against North Korea. South Koreans also stress the need for close consultation prior to deployment, because the unit's mission may have serious implications for Korea.

Ambassador Hill addressed some of these concerns on 11 January 2005 by disclosing that USFK is in Korea "to maintain our alliance with South Korea," and "any other use of USFK would be decided only in full consultation with the Korean government, and only if such a decision would have no negative security impact in Korea." Still others suggested that at least one-third of USFK should remain committed to the defense of South Korea. Some South Koreans even believe a revision of the Mutual Defense Treaty and perhaps the SOFA is necessary to accommodate the changes that are likely to be discussed during the SPI talks. One of the more constant themes is the fact that the upcoming SPI talks are a great opportunity to rejuvenate the alliance. However, most believe success will require much high-level attention from both countries. Many recommended a joint declaration by the two presidents at the conclusion of SPI.

THE NORTH KOREA THREAT PERCEPTION GAP

According to a recent article by Marcus Noland of the Institute for International Economics, “a growing majority of South Koreans, having lived for decades in the shadow of its forward-deployed artillery, do not regard North Korea as a serious threat.” On the other hand, the U.S. “regards the North and its nuclear program with alarm.” The study also said “the gap in the two countries’ respective assessments of the North Korean threat has patently widened.” It also cited a recent opinion poll that revealed “more South Koreans saw the U.S. as the principal threat to peace than those who identified North Korea as the biggest threat.” The study highlighted the fact that the threat perception widened for Korea’s younger generation and those with higher education levels. There are other recent surveys that are consistent with these findings.

Perhaps the most glaring example of the widening perception gap is President Roh’s November 2004 speech in Los Angeles. He declared, “there was some validity to the North’s argument that its nuclear and missile programs are intended to deter outside threats.” According to some Korean officials, President Roh made these remarks because he felt many U.S. conservatives were growing more frustrated with the North and were ready for even tougher policies towards the North, perhaps even considering a pre-emptive military strike. South Korean officials commented that the North Korean issue is a matter of national survival for Korea, whereas it is a non-proliferation or human rights issue for the U.S.

A recent opinion poll conducted by the Joongang Daily in September 2003 and recent interviews with South Korean officials and experts seems to suggest that the threat perception gap between the U.S. and South Korea is there, but it does not seem to be as great as is currently being portrayed. It is true that Joongang’s opinion poll also revealed that most respondents do not believe North Korea will launch a “full-scale attack” against the South. However, many still view North Korea as a “threat.” According to the poll, 45 percent of the respondents indicated that North Korea poses the “biggest threat to South Korea.” Even though another 26.1 percent of the respondents viewed the U.S. as the “biggest threat,” it is a clear reversal from the previous opinion poll in which a study found “more South Koreans saw the U.S. as the principal threat to peace.” Another survey conducted by Korea National Defense University in November 2004, revealed that 85 percent of the ROK military believed that “North Korea already has nuclear weapons which are ready for use and that the ROK should consider North Korea as the main enemy.”

What is perhaps more important to note is that some in South Korea seem to recognize the need to narrow the threat perception gap. The South Korean government had been criticized for failing to use the term “main enemy” for North Korea when it decided to omit the designation in the Ministry of National Defense (MND)’s 2000 Defense White Paper. A March 2003 paper published by Korea’s National Security Council also avoided the contentious label. More recently, however, the ministry described North Korea as “the most important threat.” This latest change appears to be a compromise that demonstrates South Korea’s desire to narrow the threat perception gap with the U.S. In fact, on 30 December 2004, North Korea’s spokesman for the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland announced, “although the expression is different, the [South Korean Defense] ministry’s decision to replace the so-called ‘main enemy’ expression with the ‘most important threat’ is, in essence, an act against the Republic with the intention to continuously regard us as an enemy.” It remains to be seen if the Roh administration is willing to do more to narrow the threat perception gap with the U.S.

THE YOUNGER GENERATION

Another recent study described South Koreans in their thirties and forties as “no longer fearing Pyongyang as their parents did and are less easily swayed by anti-communist appeals,” and are “less likely to be pro-American.” A recent interview with a progressive scholar in South Korea indicated that although the threat perception has changed in recent years, one should not assume that the younger generation is anti-American. They are well aware of the important contributions of the U.S.-ROK alliance. However, what they oppose is perceived U.S. heavy-handedness and unfairness. The scholar echoed many others by saying “what the South Koreans truly desire is respect and more equal status from the U.S.” This is likely to happen over time as Korea continues to mature and both sides work to improve their communications.

South Korean officials and security experts make it clear that if the U.S. is perceived to be an obstacle to reunification and the two Koreas manage to achieve a significant breakthrough, it will increase tensions between the two allies. More importantly, some warn that if the South’s rapprochement with the North fails, the U.S. could become an easy scapegoat for the failure. Many advised that it is in the interest of both countries to publicly narrow the North Korea policy gap as quickly as possible, especially if the U.S. truly believes peaceful resolution is the desired outcome. South Koreans also warned that it must be consulted prior to any military action, and if the U.S. chooses to act unilaterally, it would be unacceptable to South Korea under present conditions and could threaten the alliance. Since the U.S. has repeatedly declared it has “no intention of invading North Korea,” the two sides should be able to narrow the North Korean policy gap. This will give more room for diplomacy to resolve the crisis, and should improve America’s image in South Korea.

THE CHINA FACTOR

China remains an important factor in South Korea’s strategic calculations. Some suggest the Roh administration was clearly leaning toward China, while others stress it remains committed to the U.S.-ROK alliance but also wants friendly relations with China. However, most South Koreans seem to agree that China’s recent claims to the history of Koguryo — an ancient Korean Kingdom that extended from the northern part of the peninsula into northeast China — convinced many in South Korea to rethink the future role of China in the Korean peninsula. It was evident that most South Koreans interpreted China’s claim to Koguryo negatively, and it has rekindled South Korean perceptions of China as a threat. They took great umbrage (some even suspected Chinese territorial ambitions) at competing Chinese claims to “ownership” of the ancient kingdom’s historical heritage. The China debate appears to have persuaded many in South Korea that the U.S. is the only major power in Northeast Asia that does not have any territorial designs on Korea, while the others in the region have historical tendencies to dominate the Korean peninsula. The pendulum appears to have swung back in favor of the U.S. for the time being, but one is reminded that China still looms large in Korea. According to a recent opinion poll, nearly 50 percent of all respondents indicated that China should be the country that Korea maintains the closest diplomatic ties with if the U.S.-ROK alliance deteriorates.

U.S.-JAPAN RELATIONS

South Korea is very concerned about U.S. efforts to expand the U.S.-Japan security alliance. Many believe the pace of change in Japan's security posture is too fast and they fear its lofty status as America's most important ally in the Asia-Pacific will result in an inevitable downgrade in Korea's own status. Some wonder whether this is happening to counter China. As a shrimp among whales, South Korea is concerned about the rising tensions between Japan and China. South Koreans are also aware of the speculation that a Northeast Asia command will be formed at Camp Zama, Japan. South Korea is unlikely to accept any U.S. command structure that subordinates U.S. forces in Korea to a headquarters located in Japan. They seem to view this as an indication that Korean interests are being subordinated to Japanese interests. Although cultural exchanges between the two countries have advanced significantly over the last five years, South Korea appears to be wary of Japanese attempts to strengthen bilateral security relations. Some of the discussions also indicate that South Korea will continue to resist U.S. initiatives to expand U.S.-Japan-ROK security cooperation. This is in part because of its historical legacy with Japan, but also because it does not want to unnecessarily antagonize China.

IMPLICATIONS FOR 2005

The United States and South Korea have accomplished a great deal under the FOTA initiative. However, the two have more difficult work ahead to rejuvenate the alliance in 2005. Although recent trends are mixed, some evidence suggests the North Korean threat perception gap may be narrowing between the two allies. Moreover, recent indications are that leaders in both countries appear to be showing their commitment to the alliance by working harder to narrow the perception gap. This trend needs to continue in 2005 to build momentum for the future of the alliance. It is also important for both sides to do more to correct the perception that U.S. hard-line policy toward the North is an obstacle to North-South reconciliation. The political will to respond to the perception gap is likely to set the tone for the future of the alliance. The failure to narrow the gap is almost certain to increase tensions in the alliance at a time when the U.S. is prosecuting the war on terrorism, realigning and transforming USFK, and attempting to determine a new rationale and a common vision for the alliance.

Other factors can complicate the relationship. The continued polarization of South Korea's politics could impede on-going efforts to build consensus for the alliance. This may even weaken South Korea's commitment to rebuild Iraq. The two sides also have to carefully monitor the implementation of Yongsan relocation and the amended LPP to ensure that it occurs smoothly and according to plan. In addition, the joint study to determine the rationale and the vision for the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance needs to occur through close consultation and the results should be announced at a level that will clearly demonstrate the two countries' commitment to the future of the alliance. The U.S. must also be patient and mindful of Korean perceptions of Japan and its security calculations concerning China. All this will require recognition of current tensions, and the political will to improve communications and promote closer consultations at all levels. It is encouraging to know that many South Koreans recognize the importance of the alliance and welcome greater interaction to promote mutual understanding and trust between the two allies.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of APCSS, U.S. Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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