

Redefining ROK's Strategic Posture in the Twenty-First Century

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Introduction

The Republic of Korea (ROK) requires a new strategic vision and a workable new strategy befitting a changing security environment and changing national interests. Having been preoccupied with an engagement policy toward Pyongyang, South Korea seems to be lacking a long-term strategic vision beyond the peninsula. In other words, its national strategy is not well defined. Moreover, the South Korean people are sharply divided over their country's security and foreign policies.

During the Cold War, the Korean Peninsula was a key battleground between the Soviet Union and the United States. At the 38th parallel, two triangular alliances confronted one another—to the north, Moscow and Beijing siding with Pyongyang, to the south Washington and Tokyo siding with Seoul. South Korea's foreign policy during that period reflected the containment policy of the U.S., following Washington's security measures. It accepted America's leadership unquestionably because its survival depended on U.S. military and economic support. Thus, for the past half a century, the U.S.–ROK alliance served as an effective security framework to deter North Korean aggression and helped to create a stable environment for continuous economic growth and democratic dynamism in South Korea.

Since the mid-1990s, the North Korean nuclear crisis has revealed the beginnings of a post-Cold War divergence in priorities, strategic visions, and near-term policies between Seoul and Washington, as the U.S. focus shifted to global stability and counter-proliferation while South Korea's interests centered on maintaining peace and stability on the peninsula. At the same time, fundamental changes in relations among Northeast Asian countries weakened or dissolved the two Cold War triangles. In addition, as China and Japan attempt to expand their influence in the region, a new, more competitive strategic triangle—the U.S.,

Japan, and China—emerged. Given improved relations with China and Russia and inter-Korean reconciliation, South Korea's security dependency on the U.S. has been reduced significantly. Through the diversification of its exports market, its economy is also no longer dependent on the American market. Moreover, its remarkable economic growth and successful democratization has changed not only Koreans' perception of their nation but also other nations.

Facing a lingering North Korean crisis, surrounded by increasingly assertive neighbors, and influenced by globalization and domestic democratization, South Korea has experienced difficulties in managing its foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. The end of the Cold War removed the Korean security framework that promoted close ties with the U.S. and non-engagement with North Korea and, to a lesser extent, China. As a result, South Korea's relations with the United States have grown more strained, its approaches to China more accommodating, its attitudes toward North Korea more engagement-oriented, and its relations with Japan more complicated. South Korea today seems less of a bridge and more of a sandwich, buffeted by the incipient rivalries of major powers in the region, stymied by North Korea's nuclear ambition, and increasingly uncertain of its long-term relationship with the United States.¹

Although the future of North Korea is opaque, a possible denuclearization of North Korea and a permanent peace mechanism on the peninsula could undercut virtually overnight the *raison d'être* of the U.S.–ROK alliance. It would compel Washington to further readjust its alliance relationship with Seoul and its forward-deployed forces on the peninsula and necessitate that Seoul reformulate its national strategy. Furthermore, in the coming decades a reunified Korea is possible. The emergence of a unified Korea will certainly introduce an entirely new dimension to the strategic dynamics of East Asia. Indeed, the country will be likely caught between two continental states (China and Russia) and two maritime powers (the United States and Japan). In the absence of a multilateral security mechanism (akin to NATO) to manage such a tectonic geopolitical shift, there is little reason to expect relations in the

region after Korean unification to be either smooth or comfortable.

In the past, military confrontation with the North and domestic preoccupation with economic growth prevented Seoul from pondering alternatives to the U.S.–ROK alliance. Now, more possibilities and options may become available for Seoul to consider.² Although the resilience of North Korea prohibits the diffusion of the full post-Cold War logic, South Korea is running out time to reconfigure its Cold War-based strategic thinking, to reassess its half-century alliance relationship with the United States, and to prepare a long-term national strategy. It is clear that Seoul's geopolitical future does not rest on the evolving dynamics of U.S.–ROK relations alone. Indeed, any analysis of the ROK's alternative futures in the context of alliance would not be complete without incorporating the views and potential positions of the two regional powers in Northeast Asia, namely China and Japan. Beijing and Tokyo obviously have a tremendous stake and vested interests in the peninsula, and both recognize that any dramatic change on the peninsula could either benefit or severely undermine the geopolitical position of either player, perhaps at the expense or to the benefit of the other.

In exploring Korea's long-term national strategy, there are numerous questions regarding its strategic options and choices and their implications for the U.S.–ROK alliance and Northeast Asia. At a time of major transformation in East Asia and the world, what are Korea's major challenges and opportunities? What are the long-term national interests of the ROK or a united Korea? What are the critical threats to the vital interests of the country? Will a reunified Korea continue to ally itself with the United States, or will it bandwagon with China, thus causing alarm in Washington and Tokyo about China's expanding sphere of influence? Or will it choose to go it alone, thus creating more uncertainty than the status quo? Or will it choose to be neutral in order to avoid entangling with regional conflict? The most important question is: is there a better strategic alternative for South Korea than the status quo—the U.S.–ROK alliance?

This article examines the ROK's potential long-term strategic options and explores its strategic choices. After discussing its national interests and potential threats to them, it

evaluates ROK's four potential strategic options in terms of its national interests in the order of neutrality, strategic independence, strategic collaboration with China, and alliance with the U.S. Finally, it concludes that there is no better strategic alternative than a readjustment of the status quo—the U.S.–ROK alliance.

The ROK's National Interests

A national strategy aims to protect national interests. Without a debate on national interests it is impossible to set a course for a nation. In order to evaluate the ROK's potential strategic options and explore its new national strategy, it needs to examine its current national interests. The Korean government outlines four national interests: 1) ensure national survival; 2) promote liberal democracy and human rights; 3) pursue economic development and the promotion of public welfare; and, 4) achieve peaceful unification.³ The ROK's Defense White Paper defines its primary military mission as defending the nation "from North Korea, including its conventional military capabilities, weapons of mass destruction and forward military deployment."⁴ The ROK government also acknowledges four major challenges to the global security environment and implicitly Korean security. These are transnational terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, persisting regional instability and local disputes, and non-military threats, such as environmental threats and epidemic diseases.⁵

Issues related to the ROK's national interests are discussed in the order of national security, economy, democracy, and unification.

National Security

Among the four categories of the ROK's national interests, national survival is the most critical interest. Without security, three other national interests cannot be guaranteed. Unfortunately, Koreans, especially intellectuals, have a tradition of neglecting security.⁶

Any discussion of Korea's strategy cannot be separated from a consideration of its geography, as its location makes it one of the most strategic pieces of real estate on earth. Its geographical

situation at the intersection of the security interests of the major powers in Northeast Asia presents Korea with a number of long-term security and related alliance dilemmas. Despite its strategically vulnerable position, the country, which was often referred to as a “hermit kingdom,” lacked a viable national strategy to protect its sovereignty. Thus, it has a painful experience of mismanaging foreign policy in the second half of 19th and early 20th century.

Since 1945 the division of Korea has presented a unique and extraordinary situation, a kind of acute security crisis. The two Koreas fought a bloody war and since the armistice of 1953 has remained technically at war with the constant possibility of renewed conflict. Therefore, policies adopted by the ROK government were security-oriented.⁷ It is difficult to make sense of South Korea without understanding the impact of the Korean War and consequent security dilemma. As Northeast Asia has increasingly become important strategically and economically, the Korean Peninsula has also become the geo-strategic center of the region where the interests of major powers intersect. In the long run, the question of which direction a unified Korea might lean strategically could engender competition for a close relationship with Seoul among Washington, Tokyo and Beijing.

Military threats and the economic failure of North Korea have been main concerns of South Korea. North Korea’s nuclear test further complicates the ROK’s strategic calculation. A nuclear-armed North Korea means incalculable costs, both direct and indirect, for South Korea. These include a grave security threat, capital flight and a faltering stock market in South Korea and perhaps other countries in the region, not to mention the price of rolling back an extant North Korean nuclear weapons program and the costs associated with an arms race and nuclear proliferation ripple effect to Japan, Taiwan and even Southeast Asia, all resulting in a tension-filled region created by North Korea.⁸ Most importantly, South Korea cannot counterbalance a nuclear-armed North Korea. In addition, the fact that North Korea’s political-economic system is defunct multiplies its risks because of the inherent uncertainty surrounding the failed system, and a sudden collapse of the current regime in Pyongyang cannot be ruled out.

Beyond the Korean Peninsula, despite the end of the Cold War the security environment is complex and uncertain with a rapidly “rising” China, an assertive Japan and a reengaging Russia in the region. China is the principal long-term concern of security experts in the region. They believe that China’s future conduct represents the greatest regional uncertainty and, at the same time, the most important factor affecting regional security.⁹ The challenge from China is increasingly as much for political influence as it is for military power. China seeks to use its growing arsenal of economic, political, and military tools to draw East Asian countries closer to it in terms of economic integration, political system, and military cooperation.¹⁰

Alerted by China’s aggressive posture and North Korean nuclear and missile threats, Japan pursues an assertive foreign policy, strengthens its military alliance with the United States, continues to strengthen its armed forces, and discusses the revision of its constitution to allow it to play a more active role in security.¹¹ The Japanese military has the size and capabilities to potentially pack a punch in conventional terms second only to that of the United States in the Asia-Pacific.¹² Given disputes over historical and territorial issues with Japan, Koreans are uneasy about the expansion of Japan’s role in both political and military matters.

Recovering confidence and flush with oil money, Russia wants to counterbalance the Western powers led by the United States and pursues a “strategic partnership” with China under the umbrella of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.¹³ Thus, through the Six-Party Talks and other bilateral and multilateral channels, Russia is actively engaging with countries in East Asia. With the rise of China, a perceived resurgence of militarism in Japan, and a reengaging Russia, some Koreans worry about a repetition of the great-power rivalry of the late nineteenth century that resulted in Korea’s colonization.

According to a 2006 survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Koreans are suspicious of two neighboring countries—China and Japan. Eighty-eight percent of respondents believe that the growth of Chinese military power will be a potential source of conflict between major powers in Asia, and sixty-eight percent see the prospect of China becoming more

powerful militarily as negative. On the other hand, eighty-one percent have no or very little trust in Japan acting responsibly in the world. Sixty-six percent think Japan is playing a very negative (20%) or somewhat negative (46%) role in resolving the key problems facing Asia.¹⁴

The same survey summarizes South Koreans' perceptions of critical threats to the ROK's vital interests in the next ten years.¹⁵ Sixty-five percent of respondents see North Korea as a security threat, up 24 points from 41 percent in 2004. Among the list of possible sixteen critical threats to the country's vital interests, global warming (67%) tops the list, followed by disruption in energy supply (64%), epidemic diseases (59%), North Korea becoming a nuclear power (50%), the rise of China as a military power (49%), international terrorism (45%), and the rise of Japan as a military power (43%).

Democracy and Human Rights

Many Koreans made great sacrifices in order to build and protect freedom and democracy in South Korea. During the Cold War era, democracy and human rights became very important values in South Korea. Strictly following the Hallstein doctrine, the Syngman Rhee administration opened diplomatic relations only with non-Communist countries. Throughout the Cold War, anti-Communism and democracy were regarded as important for the ROK's foreign relations. With the coming of the post-Cold War era, the role of democracy and human rights in Korean foreign relations reduced significantly. Thus, in order to promote security and economic interests the Roh Tae Woo administration normalized relations with the Soviet Union, China and most other socialist countries. Nevertheless, democracy has now become a central part of national purpose and in identity in the world.

Since the inauguration of the Sunshine Policy in 1998, however, democracy and human rights have often been neglected issues in inter-Korean relations. Seoul did not seem to pay attention to the fact that the values of democracy and human rights contradict the goal of unification—another important national interest. While democracy and human rights are regarded as the most essential values in South Korea, they are

almost completely denied in the totalitarian North Korean system. Pursuing reconciliation and cooperation with Pyongyang, South Korea often compromised the principles of democracy by neglecting human rights issues in inter-Korean negotiations. It has also been tolerant of a considerable spread of North Korea's *Juche* ideology and pro-Pyongyang activities in South Korea. In addition, it often abstained from United Nations Human Rights resolutions against North Korea.

The new Korean President Lee Myung-Bak pledged not to hesitate to make an issue of the North's human rights violations in inter-Korean relations. It is to be seen whether promotion of such values as democracy, human rights and a market economy in North Korea and in other parts of the world will be an important consideration in the foreign policy of South Korea.

Economic Interests

As South Korea has become a major economy in the world, it has also become sensitive in protecting its economic interests. Protection of economic interests is critical for a resource-poor and trade-dependent economy like South Korea.

Economic interests could be protected and promoted by expanding trade and investment as well as securing the supply of critical resources such as energy. As the Korean economy is sandwiched between high-tech Japan and labor-cheap China, it is urgent for Seoul to make the economy more competitive and to continue to expand export markets. The promotion of science and technology and human resources development is an absolute prerequisite to achieving this. Moreover, economic interests will be greatly increased through regional cooperation in East Asia as well as free trade agreements with major export markets such as the United States and the European Union.

As the population of the world continues to grow and population-rich China and India accelerate economic growth, the competition for critical resources such as energy is becoming fierce. In this connection, by taking advantage of the vast oil and gas resources in Siberia, Russia is increasingly becoming a major economic actor in the region. By 2020, Asia's energy consumption will roughly double,¹⁶ and the energy supply situation will continue to deteriorate. East Asian nations face

growing demands for energy and are locked in fierce competition for stakes in overseas oil and gas fields in Asia and other parts of the world. Military tensions and conflicts in East Asia are becoming increasingly associated with access to and control over maritime resources, especially between Japan and China in the East China Sea, which is believed to be rich in reserves of oil and gas.¹⁷

South Korea, like Japan, has relatively few fossil fuel resources and is almost entirely reliant on energy imports to support its economy. In order for the country to promote continuous economic development, the security of energy and essential raw materials is essential. Thus, energy security has become and continues to be a serious issue for Seoul. The values of South Korea's imports of energy occupy two-thirds of the total of its imports. South Korea is the world's sixth largest oil consumer and the fourth largest oil importer in 2001, and 77 percent of its oil comes from the Middle East.¹⁸

Currently, the country sees its greatest risks in the area running along the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca, though the Indian Ocean to the Middle East. This is the route that energy supplies—so fundamental to the Korean economy and national welfare—travel. In addition, South Korea, or even a unified Korea, cannot escape a heavy dependence on other essential resources such as coal, uranium and grain purchased from abroad. Denying strategic commodities could potentially strangle a coastal nation like South Korea. Therefore, defending its surrounding sea areas and securing the safety of maritime traffic are vital to its national existence and economic viability. However, preoccupied with North Korean threats and with the tradition of a continental state and dependence on the superior American naval protection, the ROK Navy's role in the defense of the Sea Lanes of Communications in the distant waters has been almost absent.

Fortunately, South Koreans recognize the importance of the protection of economic interests. According to a 2006 survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, South Koreans consider protection of economic interests very important as their country's foreign policy goals in the next ten years: economic growth (79%), protecting jobs (68%), protecting interests of

South Korean businesses abroad (65%), and securing energy supplies (63%).¹⁹

Unification

Unification is an important national goal for South Korea. However, inter-Korean relations contain two contradictory factors—unification and security. The former is more likely an inter-Korean issue, while the latter is a domestic as well as an international issue. The former emphasizes peace, cooperation and common prosperity while the latter is related to the North Korean military threat and the U.S.–ROK alliance. In addition, unification is a difficult and long-term issue while security is an immediate and critical issue. Thus, 'unification' as a major national goal makes Seoul's strategic calculation and foreign policymaking very complicated.

Korean progressives, mostly post-Korean War generations, see Korea as a victim of the great powers and the Cold War. The Korean War and continuous division are aspects of this victimization, and therefore reunification is seen as the true recovery of Korean identity as well as the most important national goal. There is a lingering identity problem: many confuse the Korean state with the Korean nation; pro-engagement elements give priority to inter-Korean cooperation and pay less attention to a weakening or compromising Korean state, including the state's security alliance.

One unexpected result of Seoul's engagement policy toward the North is a greater perceived linkage between security and unification. South Korean progressives believe that these two issues are mutually exclusive. When the South and the North are reconciling and cooperating with each other toward the goal of ultimate reunification, they wonder why they should worry about a North Korean threat. This leads progressives to question the role of U.S. forces in Korea, even perceiving them as an obstacle to Korean reconciliation.²⁰ Thus, inter-Korean cooperation (*minjok gongjo*, inter-Korean cooperation for reconciliation and unification) is perceived as more important than U.S.–ROK cooperation (*hanmi gongjo*, cooperation for security). Under the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun administrations, inter-Korean reconciliation became a top priority in Seoul's foreign policy.

The policy was a drastic departure from the tradition of security-first foreign policy. The regime in Pyongyang, which had been an enemy for six decades, suddenly became a partner. Even though North Korea continued to strengthen its military, including development of nuclear weapons, the government paid less attention to security in inter-Korean relations and provided massive economic aid which might have helped strengthen the North Korean military.

Pyongyang's primary goal is regime survival—protection of the *Juche* system. Under these circumstances, it will be almost impossible to find a compromise between the South's democracy and the North's *Juche* ideology in a process of reunification. Given the uncertainty of unification, it is unreasonable, if not dangerous, for Seoul to compromise or sacrifice other national interests such as national security and democracy in inter-Korean relation. During the past decade, therefore, Seoul's national security strategy toward the North appears not to be very effective. There has been no meaningful change in inter-Korean security relations. Seoul's peace-oriented North Korea policy mismatches Pyongyang's "military first" strategy. Peace and stability on the peninsula are very fragile and the prospects for a permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula are uncertain. Therefore, priority must be given to security rather than unification.

Seoul's Strategic Options

The geopolitical environment of the Korean Peninsula and the security dynamics of Northeast Asia complicate Seoul's strategic calculus and future options. Seoul has much to gain and much to lose, depending on how well it performs in its foreign policy.²¹ Located in a place where the interests of four global powers—the U.S., Japan, China and Russia—intersect, Seoul needs the highest levels of strategy vision and diplomatic skill. Correctly assessing its circumstances and then articulating an appropriate posture and response is of absolute necessity.²² A telling quote from two experts underscores this dictum: "Mistakes in operations and tactics can be corrected, but political and strategic mistakes live forever."²³

It is time for South Korea to forge a long-term security strategy that will affect its situation well into the next 30-50 years. Its strategic choice could contribute to peace and stability or trigger major power competition and historical animosities in the region. The complexities associated with forecasting the paths of inter-Korean reconciliation and eventual reunification and the various responses of regional powers to the changes in the peninsula make it exceedingly difficult to predict a unified Korea's security strategy. Notwithstanding, it is worthwhile to explore one. Four strategic options—neutrality, strategic independence, strategic collaboration with China, and the status quo (the US–ROK alliance)—that the ROK or a unified Korea might consider are examined.²⁴

Neutrality

Korea was often known as "a minnow among whales," or a pawn in the international rivalry among China, Japan, and Russia. One means by which Korea tried to stave off the great powers from encroaching upon its sovereignty was to declare international neutrality. In 1885, Kil-jun Yu, a leading advocate of reform at the time in Korea, published a coherent and comprehensive argument for neutrality.²⁵ Considering the conflicting interests of major powers around the Korean Peninsula, at Yalta in February 1945 Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin reached an agreement that post-war Korea would be put under a five-year trusteeship and that no foreign troops should be permanently stationed in Korea, promising to guarantee its neutrality internationally.²⁶ Facing similar conflicting major power interests after World War II, Austria became a neutral state.

Two leading sea powers (the United States and Japan) and a continental power (China) are competing in East Asia in general and on the Korean Peninsula in particular. Thus, South Korea and some Southeast Asian countries are increasingly being caught in the middle. Nations in the Asia-Pacific region will have to learn to accommodate two key powers (the U.S. and China) in their midst. Most Asian nations are not willing to make a choice between the U.S. and China and are therefore keen to put regional agreements in place in which all major players have

a stake. Thus, countries from Australia to Singapore have openly vowed to remain “neutral” in possible conflicts between China and the U.S. A powerful aversion to great-power competition, in which Korea was a victim, might compel Korea to declare neutrality.

Like German unification, Korean unification would instantly create the question of alignment vs. neutrality. The Soviet Union initially insisted on the neutrality of a unified Germany.²⁷ The question over which direction a unified Korea might lean strategically would engender competition for a close relationship with Seoul between Tokyo and Beijing as well as between Washington and Beijing. China would be greatly concerned about the possibility of an American outpost near the Sino-Korean border. On the other hand, a unified Korea that comes under the influence of Beijing is a nightmarish scenario for Japan (and the U.S. as well), since it would further isolate this island state and remove the buffer zone existing between the maritime and continental powers.

The neutrality option promises seemingly attractive benefits.²⁸ A stance that avoids alliance politics or closer association with one power, which inevitably fuels enmity from another, could allow Korea to attract as many countries as possible to support the tremendous costs of reunification. Neutrality would also allow the country to avoid expensive military modernization plans and focus on the reconstruction of northern Korea. Thus, neutrality has long been an option for a unified Korea, especially among progressives and students. Some believe that neutrality is the best strategic option for a unified Korea. For example, In Kwan Hwang advocates that the current North Korean nuclear issue as well as Korean reunification can be solved simultaneously by establishing a permanently neutral Korea, similar to Switzerland or Austria. He suggests that a *quid pro quo* agreement on North Korean abandonment of nuclear weapons program and US troop withdrawal from South Korea could be reached through a framework of permanent Korean neutrality.²⁹

During the Chang administration in South Korea in the early 1960s, progressive parties and students advocated a neutralized reunification. At that time U.S. Senator Mike Mansfield also

made a proposal for Korean reunification on the basis of neutralization on the Austrian pattern, which was supported by pro-unification advocates in South Korea. Since then, neutrality has been consistently supported as a principle of unification by progressive elements.³⁰ Some American scholars support such an idea. Bruce Cumings argues, for instance, “A neutralized Korea could . . . solve the problems of security and unity, predicated on the withdrawal of U.S. troops and solemn and verifiable agreements with the other powers to respect Korean neutrality.”³¹ Believing in the “first-best” solution for American diplomacy in Korea, Cumings insists that neutrality amid radical disarmament by both sides would be the essential enabling condition that would move the current track of reconciliation onto a realistic future track of Korean reunification. Selig Harrison also advocates a neutral Korea.³²

Since the launch of the Sunshine Policy the notion of neutrality has frequently been discussed among progressive intellectuals and pro-sunshine activists.³³ In a conference on “Neutralized Korean Peninsula” in Seoul, a Korean scholar argued that Kim Il Sung had supported unification by neutrality and his son, Kim Jong Il, pursues a unification through Switzerland-style neutralization.³⁴ A compromised unification between the two conflicting systems could lead to politically neutralized unification, which could prevent intervention of regional powers in the unification process. The problem is that the nature of this neutralized reunification is not defined. Neutralized unification means a compromised solution to national division. However, the two Koreas have long engaged in a zero-sum game. Under these circumstances, a possible agreement on neutralized unification might be reached if the status quo of the two regimes is guaranteed with the sense of equal security. As a result, South Korea’s democracy could be in danger due to the existence of the inflexible and monolithic *Juche* ideology.

A neutralized unified Korea is likely to encounter a number of potential disadvantages.³⁵ It might experience limited flexibility in foreign relations, lack an effective system of checks and balances among the major powers, bring about a power vacuum that would leave Korea vulnerable to foreign interference,

or lose the rationale for foreign assistance. In particular, neutrality could increase rather than decrease the major power rivalry and competition in Northeast Asia, with the risk of insecurity. Any move made by a neutral Korea could be perceived as favoring one or more of the major powers. Considering deep-rooted animosity toward Japan and increasingly ambivalent attitudes toward the U.S., a neutralized Korea is more likely to fall under the influence of China.³⁶ In addition, unless a state has sufficient military capability to guarantee its own neutrality, its neutrality is entirely at the mercy of its more powerful neighbors.³⁷ Interpreting the historical tragedy of Korea after the late 19th century, Pyong-choon Hahm has written that “In as much as the ambition of Korea’s neighbors was to secure supremacy in Korea to the exclusion of others, a declaration of neutrality was simply ignored whenever they decided to contest each other’s claim by force of arms.”³⁸

The argument for neutrality is based on the weakness of an old Korea. Whereas Switzerland is a landlocked small country surrounded by stronger neighbors in Europe, Korea is, geographically, a peninsula and has become a middle power that is continuously growing economically and militarily. A unified Korea will be a middle power with a population of more than 70 million and an economy as big as the twelfth largest in the world, whose policy will have a significant effect on the regional balance of power. Furthermore, some argue that the end of the Cold War and regional economic integration have rendered neutrality useless and irrelevant.³⁹ It was the balance of power system that created the doctrine of neutrality. Arguably there is no such balance of power in East Asia, where the United States allied with Japan is a dominant power and tries to promote cooperation with China. Countries in the region are also increasingly interdependent. In terms of protecting and promoting national interests, this option seems to contain more dangers and uncertainties than benefits.

Strategic Independence

This option is the inverse of the neutrality stance. A strategically independent Korea remains a possibility, given that new nationalist sentiments following unification may result in a

domestic political consensus that rejects an alliance with a major power. Currently, some Koreans tend to see the U.S.–ROK security alliance as imposing unnecessary constraints at the expense of Korean national interests. The Korean leadership might conclude that military strength provides the most reliable security hedge against potential threats from powerful neighboring countries. Moreover, a credible military capability would allow a unified Korea to determine its own new destiny and perhaps even play the role of an emerging regional power. A unified Korea would inherit a sizeable conventional military, a significant missile arsenal, and perhaps nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) from North Korea. Under this scenario, Korea might engage in a classic balance of power game, playing one power off another.⁴⁰

A small but growing number of South Korean nationalists believe that a unified Korea, sandwiched between China, Russia, and Japan, and perhaps not closely aligned with the United States, ought to adopt a more autonomous, “middle power” orientation. In fact, the Roh Moo Hyun administration chose as its priority a more active, independent foreign policy with the goal of strategically repositioning South Korea vis-à-vis the U.S. and Japan to become a “balancer” in Northeast Asia. In his speech in March 2005, Roh stated that South Korea would begin to play a “balancing role” in the region and that “the power equation in Northeast Asia will change depending on the choices we make,” suggesting that support for its traditional allies, the United States and Japan, would not be automatic.⁴¹ He stated later that his country would maintain an equal distance between Tokyo and Beijing.⁴²

A few days later in a meeting with foreign ministry officials in the Blue House, Prime Minister Hae-Chan Lee said, “The time has come for Korea to establish an independent geo-political policy that will move beyond [the] old Cold War that sought to contain China and North Korea.” Immediately, President Roh endorsed the prime minister’s remarks.⁴³ The Roh administration argued that the US–South Korea–Japan southern trilateral alliance, which was created to counter the North Korea–Soviet Union–China northern trilateral alliance during the Cold War, had become an obstacle to, rather than a bulwark for, peace and

stability in the region because the northern alliance had disintegrated. It advocated that under the current circumstances the southern alliance should be replaced by a multilateral security mechanism and that South Korea should play the role of a balancer in this process.

But the strategic independence option has some drawbacks. First of all, as Tanisha Fazal has argued, a buffer state, such as Korea, which lies between rivals, is most vulnerable to external threats. Each rival fears the possibility that its opponent will take over the buffer. This fear produces a strategic imperative that leads to a fatal outcome—buffer state death. In fact, during late the 19th and early 20th century, regional powers engaged in enduring rivalries created security dilemmas around the Korean Peninsula. Korea became a victim of these rivalries.⁴⁴ Korea must have a national strategy that prevents its becoming a buffer state.

Second, a militarily strong Korea would make neighboring countries uneasy, and could lead to an arms race or significant military tensions in the region. A strategically independent Korea may harbor offensive strategic ambitions such as an independent nuclear arsenal with matching offensive platforms with long-range ballistic missiles, a virtual blue water navy, and robust air and space platforms. How a unified Korea opts to address the WMD issue could well prove decisive for the regional powers and for regional strategic stability as a whole. A unified Korea that pursues the nuclear option will most likely result in political and economic sanctions from the international community, Japan's nuclear armament, and intense Chinese and Russian suspicions of Korea. Combined with the tremendous financial constraints that are likely to confront a unified Korea, a strategically autonomous Korea with WMD ambitions is the worst possible security alternative.⁴⁵

Third, Korea's relative military and economic power will not be strong enough for it to pursue strategic independence. Does South Korea have the political will and fiscal capabilities to build a self-reliant force? The option would require the country to possess a large military force to match those of surrounding countries. Korea would find it difficult to bear the economic and political burden of building such a strong military. However, the

real impediment to an independence defense will be domestic opposition.⁴⁶ The further allocation of national resources to defense is at odds with national rhetoric about the very poor brethren of the North. It would also be difficult for the government in Seoul to justify moving money out of already chronically under-funded sectors such as welfare, health and education.

As a matter of fact, South Korea does not have the economic capability to build an independent defense with limited time. Post-unification Korea will require astronomical amounts of capital (figures range from a low of \$250 billion in government expenditures to a high of \$3 trillion in total investment) to rebuild North Korea.⁴⁷ Regional powers would likely be reluctant to support post-unification projects in order to prevent Korea building up its military. An independence defense would require the development of a powerful military capable of maintaining the perception of stability and security presently enabled by the American forces in Korea. The presence of the U.S. forces in Korea (USFK) and the maintenance of the U.S.–ROK alliance have ensured the perception of stability on the Korean Peninsula. This has encouraged fixed foreign investment that would normally be unthinkable in a country still technically in a state of war. The Korea Institute of Defense Analysis (KIDA) has estimated that in order to supplement the role of the USFK, South Korea needs to invest more than \$210 billion during the next twenty years, requiring at least \$10 billion per annum. According to South Korea's National Budget Appropriation Plan for Defense 2006-2010, the government plans to increase the defense budget by 10.2 percent annually until 2010.⁴⁸ But the government allocated only \$1.5 billion in 2004. In other words, it appears very difficult to allocate the necessary funds to build self-reliant forces.

In short, a reunited Korea does not have a comparative advantage vis-à-vis its neighbors and might also lack sufficient resources and the willpower to become a full-blown military power. Thus, this option would likely have a negative effect on the protection and promotion of the ROK's national interests such as security, economy and unification.

Strategic Collaboration with China

Another possible strategic alternative is to accede to the rise of China as the center of the region. Given the extensive economic cooperation between South Korea and China and the preeminent influence of China in dealing with North Korea, this might seem to be a realistic adjustment to an evolving Northeast Asian order.

Although South Korea and China were enemies during the Cold War, their relations have completely transformed: they enjoy warming relations and great potential for economic cooperation. Geographical proximity, low labor costs in China, and cultural similarities have accelerated economic ties between the two countries. China emerged in 2003 as South Korea's largest export market. China has also emerged as the number one destination for South Korean foreign investment, much of that driven by small- and medium-sized firms.⁴⁹ In order to protect its economic interests, Seoul is cautious in dealing with the neighboring giant. Korean opinion leaders regard China as an increasingly critical variable in Seoul's strategic equation and prescribe flexibility and discretion as virtues that Korea must cultivate in the years to come.⁵⁰

Nations located in Northeast Asia, such as China, North Korea and Russia, received special attention under the Roh Moo Hyun administration. In his inaugural address, President Roh announced a vision for promoting a peaceful and prosperous Northeast Asia. In order to formulate the strategy and policy for the vision, he established a Presidential Committee for Northeast Asia Cooperation Initiative. The nationalistic "386 generation" politicians and officials in the Roh administration were skeptical of U.S. motives and the American presence on the peninsula.⁵¹ They saw the conspicuous U.S. military presence as a symbol of the past—a past when their country was poor, dependent, a pawn in great power politics—and they believed South Korea should seek closer cooperation with neighboring China and loosen ties with the United States. Answering the question over which country would be the most important in South Korea's relations in a 2004 survey among the newly elected lawmakers of the then ruling party (the Uri Party), 63 percent selected China, while only 26 percent chose the United States.⁵² Some Korean scholars

also consider China a more important partner for South Korea than the United States.⁵³

A serious deterioration of U.S.–ROK relations or total withdrawal of US forces from Korea could lead Seoul to doubt Washington's security commitment. At the same time, a decline of American power and influence in East Asia and resultant emergence of Japan as a major military power could force Seoul to look to China for enhanced security, essentially reverting to the Sino-centric order during the millennium before the end of the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ David Kang argues that historically Asian states tended to accommodate Chinese dominance and that the emergence of a China-centric new Asian regional order might render American presence in Asia increasingly obsolete.⁵⁵ Another factor that would trigger such a course would be the weakening of the U.S.–Japan alliance. Under these circumstances, Japan might be forced to build up its forces, including nuclear weapons. Given the historical animosity with Japan and Koreans' constant concern over Japan's potential militarization, Korea might be compelled to foster closer strategic ties with China in order to balance a resurgent Japan.⁵⁶

However, there is much cost and risk in Korea's changing strategic partner from the United States to China. First of all, other powers in the region would feel threatened and would likely respond in ways that could be destabilizing. It is clear that Japan's reaction would not be friendly, if not hostile. If both China and a future (unified) Korea considers Japan as the primary threat, Korea will have put itself on a collision course with Japan as well as the United States, whose security strategy rests on the foundation of a close U.S.–Japan alliance.⁵⁷ Japan often describes the Korean Peninsula as a dagger pointed at Japan's heart, should Korea fall into the hands of China or Russia. Japan has continuously seen fundamental security interests on the peninsula and thus its Korea policy has been embedded in the larger context of the region's balance of power and, therefore, Japan has sought close relations with South Korea as a hedge against China.⁵⁸ Pyong-choon Hahm provides a lesson in Korean history: "The first principle is Korea's nonalignment . . . with any of the three immediately surrounding powers [China, Japan and Russia]. This is essential for her

survival and for peace in East Asia. But a strong alignment with any one of them would immediately be interpreted as inimical to the other two . . . Korea would again become a source of instability and war.”⁵⁹ Most importantly, China, despite its phenomenal economic growth and the continued upgrading of its military, is unlikely to be able to rise to the position of a ‘counter pole’ to the combined strength of the U.S. and Japan.⁶⁰

Although many observers concentrate on economic relations as a force drawing the two countries closer, they ignore the fact that China’s positive role as an economic magnet does not cancel out its disruptive geopolitical impact. In fact, much of Sino-Korea relations are undefined. The strategic uncertainties surrounding China’s regional intentions pose serious questions about the future of Sino-Korea relations. Seoul appears to have no clear long-term strategy toward China. Norman Levin argues that the Sino-Korea relationship is largely one-dimensional: outside of economic cooperation and Korean students’ learning about China, there is little concrete substance to the military and political relationship.⁶¹

In addition, China’s role in Korean reunification is ambivalent. It would be much more convenient for the Chinese to have the status quo of a weak, semi-puppet state in the North as a buffer. Although the geopolitics of the North Korean nuclear crisis and instability have led South Korean and Chinese strategic interests to converge, the reunification process would likely reveal sharp strategic divergence between the two countries. As Bonnie Glaser argues, Chinese perception of a unified Korea is far from optimistic:

From a longer-term perspective, China is apprehensive about [a] potential threat to its interests from a unified Korea. In the economic sphere, Beijing is wary of competition from a unified Korean economic powerhouse. Politically, the Chinese are uncertain about the role that a united Korea might play in the region and worried that Japan could eventually dominate the peninsula and undermine China’s growing influence in Korea. Militarily, the prospect of a unified Korea with at least a potential if not an actual nuclear capability is also

cause for Chinese concern. In addition, some Chinese foresee the possibility that a reunified Korea would seek to reclaim Chinese territory bordering Korea that both the North and the South view as the birthplace of the Korean nation.⁶²

In fact, Chinese nationalism seriously complicates Chinese relations with South Korea. In particular, public sensitivities to China’s historical dominance over the peninsula remain palpable in Korea. Historically, China exercised hegemony over Korea for most of its history and could be reasserting a traditional pattern of relations, which may compromise Korea’s sovereignty and national interests. The widely publicized and highly controversial dispute since 2004 between South Korea and China over the ancient Korean kingdom of Koguryo reveals the complex historical relationship between the two countries. South Koreans’ wariness has been strengthened even further by the dramatic expansion of China’s economic activity in North Korea.⁶³ There is pervasive concern in South Korea that China may turn North Korea into a Chinese satellite. Another potential source of conflict lies in unresolved jurisdictional disputes over seabed petroleum and gas deposits in the Yellow Sea.⁶⁴

The economic importance of China may also be overstated.⁶⁵ At present, economic relations between the two nations are complementary. But over time, Korean and Chinese economies will become more competitive than complementary.⁶⁶ According a 2004 survey conducted by the Korea Research Center, 43 percent of the respondents believed that China was an economic partner while 52 percent saw it as a competitor.⁶⁷ To a great extent, Korean exports to China represent imports of Korean parts for largely some 20,000 Korean firms in China. It is possible that Korean firms will eventually cope with being overrun by Chinese competition. For example, it is believed that South Korea’s technological lead over China has been reduced to four to five years. Korean companies are already losing third-country market share to Chinese firms because of higher Korean labor costs.⁶⁸

Another stumbling factor in possible Sino-Korean collaboration would be ideological differences. South Korea is a dynamic democracy while China is a well-controlled socialist

country. Strategic cooperation and a wide range of social and economic exchanges between the two neighbors would likely create unexpected political disputes. Under Chinese pressure, South Korea might have to compromise its values of democracy and human rights. Beijing has already pressured Seoul for years not to invite the Dalai Lama to visit. It would become difficult for South Korea to ignore the fact that China's closest associates are autocracies in North Korea, Burma, Pakistan, Russia, and countries in central Asia. China's favorite regional forum is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which unites it with Eurasian strongmen.

There is always a possibility that closer relations will lead to increased tension between the two countries. In contrast to most issues in South Korea today, China is not yet a highly politicized issue. In the long run, a more powerful China might flex its military and political muscles and try to dominate interactions in East Asia. It would be naïve for Seoul to think that it could play with China as an 'equal' partner. South Koreans would feel insecure about the recurrence of Chinese dominion over Northeast Asia as much as they fear the revival of so-called Japanese militarism. In that case, Korean nationalism would likely burst against China. While there is no doubt about the merits of a stable and mutually beneficial relationship with a neighboring giant, it would not be in the interest of Korea to become hostage to Chinese interests or strategies. While historically Korea has appeared to benefit from security guarantees from China, the costs have often proved prohibitive.⁶⁹

In short, although a scenario involving a South Korean turn toward China is imaginable, this option carries more dangers and uncertainties than potential benefits.

The Status Quo: the U.S.–ROK Alliance

The U.S.–ROK alliance, the long-term backbone of South Korea's security strategy, is at a crossroads. The change in the global and regional strategic environment, the widening perception gap between Seoul and Washington about threats from North Korea, the resultant policy divergence, and growing Korean nationalism have produced tension, fissure, and mutual distrust between the two allies. While a majority of Koreans

perceive the United States as a reliable ally, others, especially younger Koreans, hold an opposing view; for them the United States is an impediment to inter-Korean reconciliation. Without the memories of the Korean War and American aid during the postwar years of desperation, the younger generations focus more on the alliance-induced costs of autonomy and sovereignty which, in their view, have been excessively compromised for the strategic interests of the United States. Thus, since the start of Seoul's engagement policy toward Pyongyang, anti-Americanism in South Korea has persisted regardless of the nuclear standoff with North Korea.

Underneath the surface of anti-Americanism, many South Koreans are seriously concerned that their country might lose big if it ever broke away from the alliance. Korean experts on U.S.–ROK relations argue that the alliance is much more popular and appreciated than most Americans think.⁷⁰ In fact, most Koreans recognize the strategic importance of the United States to South Korea. According to a 2004 survey in Korea, the United States was chosen as the best strategic partner by 51 percent of the Korean public, and 79 percent of Korean opinion leaders regarded the United States as Korea's most crucial partner.⁷¹ It is also notable that 49 percent of South Koreans view the rise of China as a critical threat.⁷² In other words, most Koreans have a sense of hesitation or apprehension toward a fundamental rupture of the alliance, because they believe that the United States is the furthest away of all major powers and therefore it would be the least dangerous—the one power without territorial ambitions.⁷³

American policymakers share a strong consensus on the growing importance of Asia both in terms of the region's economic importance to the United States as well as its strategic significance. The war against terrorism has also enhanced security cooperation between the U.S. and East Asian countries. Alliance activity in the war on terrorism involves more than military action and includes countering proliferation of WMD, humanitarian assistance and development aid, democracy promotion, and other missions. For Washington, South Korea has increasingly become an important partner in the region and the world.

South Korea, located at a place where the interests of major power intersect and with an economy as large as that of the tenation ASEAN, is strategically and economically important to the United States. Some American experts thus predict a continued presence of U.S. forces in South Korea. For example, Michael O'Hanlon argues that the rationales for maintaining restructured U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula after Korean unification are twofold: 1) deterring threats (emanating from Korea-Japan hostility and the rise of China); 2) fostering regional security cooperation.⁷⁴ Michishita Narushige also predicts that the U.S.-ROK alliance will survive the North's dissolution and continue to play an important reassuring role among regional powers still mired in memories of historical rivalries.⁷⁵ The continuation of the alliance, in which the United States plays the role of "outside balancer," allows Seoul to maintain good relations with all of its powerful neighbors at the same time.⁷⁶

The United States is regarded as having more influence in Asia than any other country and is viewed as playing a positive role in resolving key problems facing East Asia.⁷⁷ As Tanisha Fazal argues, "If a more powerful third party [outside the region] intervenes to protect a buffer state [Korea], rivals will refrain from conquest because costs will exceed benefits."⁷⁸ The United States is the only country that can constrain the threats of regional powers against a relatively weak state, Korea.⁷⁹ Thus, continuation of the alliance with the United States is the surest way to protect and promote Korea's national interests and to maintain stability in the region.⁸⁰ This is not only because the alliance would ensure the security of a unified Korea, but also because this alliance combined with the U.S.-Japan alliance forms a security triangle, leaving no room for contention by neighboring countries, especially a rising China, and to a lesser extent Russia, over the Korean Peninsula.⁸¹ It would also contribute to an international environment in which China believes that establishing good relations and cooperating with a unified Korea, rather than dominating it, serves its best interests.

For a unified Korea, the worst possible strategic outcome would be fractured ties with Japan. Some in South Korea argue that an increasingly powerful Japan will emerge ultimately as a

potential adversary, particularly after unification. Conversely, there are those in Japan who maintain that a unified Korea would be much more nationalistic and show a growing antipathy toward Japan. But close cooperation between the two neighbors is essential. They are important partners, if not virtual allies, sharing the three basic systems of democracy, market economy and an alliance with the United States.

South Korea's economic relations with the much more advanced American and Japanese economies (Seoul's second and third largest trading partners respectively) are also more important than its economic ties with China. The combined GDP of the United States and Japan is currently about ten times larger than China, and the two countries are number one and two in terms of science and technology advancement as well. Even if the Chinese economy continues to grow at a higher pace than those of the U.S. and Japan, it will probably never match the combined economic power of the United States and Japan. There is also much more Korea could gain technologically by cooperating with the U.S. and Japan. In terms of foreign direct investment in South Korea, the United States and Japan have been the largest sources by far, at 54 percent and 17 percent respectively. In term of portfolio investment, American investors own almost a quarter of South Korean equities.⁸² There is no doubt that China is an important economic partner for South Korea, but the United States and Japan will continue to provide vital markets and investment for at least the next few decades.

South Korea's near total dependence on imports for its energy needs, which can only be secured by U.S. naval superiority, is another important factor to consider when pondering Seoul's future security calculations. Given America's naval dominance stretching from the Persian Gulf to the western Pacific, South Korea has to rely (or free-ride) on U.S. power projection to ensure its energy security. Further, since the United States faces no credible competitor on the high seas, at least in the medium term, Seoul will clearly benefit from Washington's ongoing security commitment.

Is There A Better Strategic Alternative than the Alliance?

Each of the four strategic options discussed above offers some benefits but also involves risks and costs (see Figure 1). The ‘neutrality’ option is perhaps the most problematic. The powerful gravitational pull of the major powers would no doubt make neutrality an unsustainable position. Korean nationalism and anti-Japanese sentiment would also make it difficult for Korea to remain neutral. Historically, a power vacuum on this land bridge between the Eurasian landmass and the Pacific Ocean has invariably drawn in one of the regional players. In addition, as pointed out earlier, unification based on some form of compromise between the democratic South and the totalitarian North would damage democracy and human rights in South Korea.

The option of a ‘strategically independent’ course would require tremendous resources at the expense of a simultaneously needed inter-Korean integration effort. The costs of expanding and then maintaining strong military capabilities to balance regional powers would likely be too heavy to bear. Such a course might also provoke hostility from all directions, Japan in particular. With a sense of increased insecurity, the principles of democracy and human rights could be compromised. In a globalized world, Korea cannot fully handle security matters unilaterally: there are many multilateral security issues, such as international terror, insecurity caused by the failure of sovereign states, international crime, environmental threats, and epidemic diseases.

Caught between major powers, Korea might try to avoid entangling itself in any conflict between China and the U.S. or between China and Japan and might prefer adopting the neutrality or strategic independence options. Either of these options, however, would put the country in the very risky position of no protection in a potentially very hostile security environment. Furthermore, if Korea were neutral or strategically independent, how would China, Japan or Russia treat Korea? Its neutrality could be easily ignored or the country could be challenged from all sides. The best way to stabilize Northeast Asia would be to prevent a unified Korea from becoming a source of contention between China and Japan.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Strategic Options

	Neutrality	Strategic Independence	Strategic Collaboration with China	The US–ROK Alliance
National Survival (security)	? (increased competition among major powers in Korea)	Negative (compete with major powers)	Negative (Japanese and American reaction)	Positive (continuation of existing order)
Democracy	Negative (democracy compromised in a neutralized unification)	Negative (insecurity may constrain democracy)	Negative (China may demand restriction on freedom)	Positive
Economic Growth		Negative (heavy defense burden)	Negative (strained economic partnerships with Japan and US)	Positive (Western market & technology)
Unification		Negative (major powers reluctant to support unification)	Negative (US and Japan reluctant to support)	

‘Strategic collaboration with China’ would risk serious deterioration of Korea’s relations with the U.S. and Japan. Korean reunification would have important implications for the security order in Northeast Asia. If a unified Korea changes its strategic partner, Northeast Asia might become unstable: should a unified Korea try to change its security partner, it would likely end up inviting intervention from other regional powers. Thus, a unified Korea under Chinese influence could lead to a military confrontation with Japan, and possibly with the United States. Moreover, should Sino-U.S. or Sino-Japan relations deteriorate, Korea risks being forced into a collision course with a superpower or a major power. Korea as a major trading nation could face a blockade by U.S.–Japan joint naval forces, causing tremendous damage to its economy. Such an option would lead to substantial loss of Korean freedom of action. Moreover, some Korean experts believe that China may not view Korea as a fully sovereign state. As soon as Korea allied with China, there is the

possibility that the latter might dominate the former. Thus, Korea's dynamic democracy could be constrained by Chinese intervention. Furthermore, the major powers (except China) might be reluctant to support Korean reunification and the reconstruction of northern Korea.

The three strategic alternatives discussed so far carry considerable risks and costs and have uncertain benefits. These options assume the termination of alliance relations with the U.S. A rising China, an increasingly nationalist Japan, and a Russia bent on regaining its lost influence in the region all point to the importance of maintaining the U.S.–ROK alliance despite all the post-Cold War changes in the region and the world.

The United States, which shares the basic values of democracy and a market economy with Korea, is the most important country for Korea in terms of national interests. As South Korea's only ally, it helps maintain peace and stability on the peninsula and in the region. It is Korea's major partner in trade and investment. In addition, its strategic relation with Japan, the United States' key ally in the region, needs to be taken into consideration when Seoul calculates its national interests. Since the United States and Japan share strategic interests, Korea's strategic relationship with any of the two nations will influence its relations with the other. Korea could play a more important international role under the alliance than without.

Ending the alliance would also likely bring unbearable serious challenges for Korea. The KIDA estimates that if the U.S. Forces in Korea withdrew or the U.S.–ROK alliance were terminated, the defense burden of the ROK would double, from currently 2.7 percent of its GDP to 5~6 percent.⁸³ The impact of U.S. troop withdrawal or of the end of the U.S.–ROK alliance on the Korean economy would likely be serious. Without the U.S. security umbrella, Korea's economic risks would also be great: some existing foreign investment in Korea might be withdrawn and foreign investors would be reluctant to invest in the country; at the same time, the transfer of advanced technology to the country would be sharply reduced. Foreign investments in South Korean stocks occupy about 40 percent of their total value.⁸⁴ Furthermore, without the American presence, South Korea would be forced to build up its forces to counter perceived

threats from neighboring countries, Japan in particular. The maintenance of the alliance would stifle the potential for an expensive military rivalry with Japan. Breaking relations with the U.S. would not only be very costly for South Korea in the short run; in the long run, it would only shift dependency from one strong partner to another.⁸⁵

As experienced in recent years, maintaining the alliance poses challenges as well. China, which shares a border with Korea, might exert tremendous pressure on a unified Korea to discontinue the alliance. The redefinition of the alliance with the United States is in this context as important as finding a sustainable relationship with China, with significant effects on bilateral relations with Japan and South Korea's global position. Of course, Sino-Korean relations continue to expand and with their geographical proximity and cultural similarity Koreans will regard China as an important partner. Thus, Korea needs to make efforts to promote regional economic and security cooperation. China may recognize that the continued existence of the U.S.–ROK alliance—the status quo in the region—will better ensure regional peace and stability than Korea's uncertain alternative strategic options. Considering China's increasing economic interdependence with the three countries in the region (the United States, Japan, and Korea), China might have no choice but to cooperate with the U. S. and its close allies.

Seoul might conclude that there is no better strategic alternative than the existing alliance and its current and emerging strategic interests would be best served by redefining the U.S.–ROK alliance to better meet a spectrum of future challenges.⁸⁶ Washington's security umbrella and relatively benign strategic objectives have proven to be (and would continue to be) the most beneficial for Korea and the most stabilizing for the region. Maintaining the alliance conforms to old Asian wisdom on strategic behavior: cooperate with a country that is big and strong, but is located far away.

Conclusion

This article explored South Korea's long-term strategic vision. It has discussed Korea's national interests and major strategic issues on and around the Korean Peninsula, and

examined Seoul's potential strategic options—neutrality, strategic independence, strategic collaboration with China, and the status quo (the U.S.–ROK alliance). Through a comparative analysis of four strategic options, it concludes that there is no better strategic alternative than the U.S.–ROK alliance. Despite diverging national interests and derivative policies between the two countries, maintaining the alliance is in the best interests of both South Korea and the United States. The costs of South Korea's strategic alternatives are much higher than their benefits. The uncertainty and risks associated with the alternatives could be fatal to the survival, independence, democracy, and prosperity of the country. In other words, South Korea's current and emerging strategic interests would be best served by redefining the alliance to better meet a spectrum of future challenges.

From the beginning, the U.S.–ROK security alliance drew its rationale from the desire of South Korea to seek an offshore balancer—a great power that would offer security but not be so close geographically that it might threaten Korean sovereignty. Since then, the security environment on and around the Korean Peninsula has changed considerably; but the fundamental rationale for South Korea to maintain a security alliance with the United States has not changed.

The initial task of reconfiguring the alliance should be an agreement on a common strategic vision or a broad set of alliance diversification principles that would adapt the alliance to an increasingly complicated security environment, build a more mature partnership on the Korean peninsula and in the Asia-Pacific region, and develop a regional and global orientation.⁸⁷ However, threats to the United States have come from “terrorists of global reach” and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, while South Korea is primarily concerned with security issues in and around the peninsula. In order for South Korea to be a better strategic partner for the U.S., the country should redefine its role in East Asia and the world, engage globally, and take on responsibility in tackling global issues such as international terrorism, proliferation of WMD, and other regional and global issues. Because of the destabilizing effect an isolated China could have in the region, U.S.–ROK alliance

diversification should be part of broader effort to enhance regional security cooperation.

The political relationship between Washington and Seoul to a large extent undermines their security alliance. According to a survey in Korea, an absolute majority (85.1%) of South Koreans believe that U.S.–ROK relations should be improved.⁸⁸ Lee Myung-Bak was elected president based on a platform of strengthening the alliance and Washington is eager to cooperate with the new Korean government. The next five years will be a crucial period for building a future-oriented U.S.–ROK alliance.

Notes:

¹ Jonathan D. Pollack, “Time to debate Korea's future strategic directions,” *The Korea Herald*, July 3, 2007.

² Jae Ho Chung, “The Korean-American Alliance and the Rise of China,” Working Paper, Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University, February 1999.

³ National Security Council, Republic of Korea *Peace, Prosperity and National Security: National Security Strategy of the Republic of Korea*, 2004, 20.

⁴ *Defense White Paper 2004* (Seoul: Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Korea, 2004).

⁵ *ROK National Security Strategy*, 18-20.

⁶ Se-jin Kim, *The Politics of Military Revolution in Korea* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), Chapter IV.

⁷ Gregory Henderson, *Korea: Politics of the Vortex* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 355-357.

⁸ Victor D. Cha, “Regional Implications of the Changing Nuclear Equation on the Korean Peninsula,” testimony at Senate Foreign Relations Committee, U.S. Congress, March 12, 2003.

⁹ Richard W. Baker, *Asia Pacific Security Survey 2006* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2007), 6. A recent Pew poll shows seven in ten Japanese express an unfavorable view of China and an equal number of Chinese dislike Japan. The poll also finds that a large majority of the respondents in Japan, Russia, and India see China's growing military capability as a threatening trend. See “China's Neighbors Worry about

its Growing Military Strength,” The Pew Global Attitudes Project, released on September 21, 2006.

¹⁰ Larry A. Niksch, “U.S. Security Policies in the Western Pacific,” paper presented at the 2005 Pacific Symposium sponsored by the National Defense University, the U.S. Pacific Command, and the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, June 8-10, 2005, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1.

¹¹ Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan’s Re-emergence as a ‘Normal’ Military Power*, Adelphi paper 368-9 (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2004).

¹² Ibid., 95.

¹³ Thomas S. Wilkins, “Russia’s ‘Strategic Partnership’: Building a Framework for Analysis,” an unpublished POSCO research paper, East-West Center, 2007.

¹⁴ “The United States and the Rise of China and India: Results of a 2006 Multination Survey of Public Opinion,” The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2006, 38.

¹⁵ “The United States and the Rise of China and India: Results of a 2006 Multination Survey of Public Opinion,” The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2006. South Korean attitudes toward North Korea reflect the complexity of the relationship. While there is concern about North Korea’s nuclear capability, there does not appear to be a great sense of alarm. An overwhelming majority (81%) believes that North Korea possesses nuclear weapons. While 79% feel at least “a bit” threatened, only 30% say they are “very” threatened. The possibility of North Korea becoming a nuclear power is seen as a critical threat by only one-half (50%) of South Koreans.

¹⁶ Asia will increase its natural gas consumption by 191 percent, oil consumption by 88 percent, and coal consumption by 97 percent. See Thomas P. M. Barnett, “Asia’s Energy Future: Military-Market Link,” in Sam J. Tangredi (ed.), *Globalization and Maritime Power* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2002), 190-191.

¹⁷ Duk-Ki Kim, “Cooperative Maritime Security in Northeast Asia,” *Naval War College Review*, LII (Winter 1999): 1, 6.

¹⁸ Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Energy, Republic of Korea <http://www.mocie.go.kr/english/policies/toward/default.asp> (November 25, 2004).

¹⁹ Ibid., 71.

²⁰ Norman D. Levin, *Do the Ties Still Bind: The U.S.-ROK Security Relationship after 9/11* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2004), 28-29.

²¹ Michael A. Weinstein, “South Korea Seeks Strategic Focus among the Behemoths,” *Power and Interest News Report*, February 14, 2005.

²² Williamson Murray and Mark Grimsley, *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2.

²³ Allen R. Millet and Williamson Murray, “Lessons of War,” *The National Interest* (Winter 1988), 3.

²⁴ For South Korea’s strategic options, the author is indebted to these materials: Jin-Hyun Paik, “ROK-US Alliance in the Post-Unification Era,” in *Managing Change on the Korean Peninsula*, eds., Kim Kyung-Won and Han Sung-Joo (Seoul: The Seoul Forum for International Affairs, 1998), 227-241; Chung Min Lee, “In Search of Strategy: South Korea’s Struggle for a New Security Paradigm,” *North-east Asian Security* 2, 2005; Victor D. Cha, “South Korea: Anchored or Adrift?” *Strategic Asia 2003-04, Fragility and Crisis* (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2003), 109-129; Charles M. Perry and Toshi Yoshihara, *The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Preparing for Korea Reconciliation and Beyond* (Herndon, VA: Brassey’s Inc., 2003), 98-101; and Hideki Yamaji, “Policy Recommendations for Japan: Unification of the Korean Peninsula,” July 2004, The Brookings Institution.

²⁵ Yu wrote a treatise entitled “On Neutrality.” Syngman Rhee, the first president of the Republic of Korea, wrote his doctoral thesis at Princeton University entitled *Neutrality as Influenced by the United States*. The thesis was published in 1912 by the Princeton University Press.

²⁶ Barry K. Gills, *Korea versus Korea: A Case of Contested Legitimacy* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 33.

²⁷ In K. Hwang, “The Prospects for One Korea in Comparison with One Germany,” in Yun Kim and Eui Hang Shin (eds.), *Toward A Unified Korea* (Columbia, SC: Center for Asian Studies, the University of South Carolina, 1995), 136-139.

²⁸ Kang Jong-Il and Yi Chae-Bong, eds., *Hanbando ui chungniphwa Tongilun kanunghanga* (Is a Neutralized Unification of the Korean

Peninsula Possible?) (Seoul: Tullyk, 2001); and “Northeast Asian Security after Korean Reconciliation/Reunification,” Summary Report from the IFPA-JIIA Workshop, February 2002, 12.

²⁹ In K. Hwang, *One Korea via Permanent Neutrality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkham, 1987); In K. Hwang, *The United States and Neutral Reunited Korea* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1990); Shiping Tang, “A Neutral Reunified Korea: A Chinese View,” *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, 13 (1999): 2; and Gabriel Jonsson, *Towards Korean Reconciliation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 216-19.

³⁰ Yoo Kwnagjin, *Hankukeui Minjokjueuiwa Tongil* (Korean Nationalism and Unification) (Seoul: Bumhaksa, 2001), 123-147.

³¹ Bruce Cumings, “The United States and Korean Unification,” Working Paper Prepared for the Task Force on U.S. Korea Policy Sponsored by the Center for International Policy and the Center for East Asian Studies, University of Chicago, December 5, 2002.

³² Selig S. Harrison, *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 347-356.

³³ For example, Kwak Tae-Hwan, professor of West Kentucky University and former president of the government-funded Korea Institute of National Unification, is representative of the pro-neutrality scholars. See his column, *Joonghwaron tonghan tongilkoria joonbihaja* (To Prepare a Unified Korea through Neutrality), *Tongil News*, April 14, 2006.

³⁴ “A Conference on Neutralized Korean Peninsula,” <http://www.ohmynews.com>. See also Ki-Chan Bae, *Korea: Dashi Saengjoneui Giroe Seuda* (Korea at the Historical Crossroad) (Seoul: Wisdom House, 2005). President Roh gave the book to his visitors as a gift.

³⁵ Chae-Jin Lee, *A Troubled Peace: U.S. Policy and the Two Koreas* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 293.

³⁶ A Chinese expert argues that a neutral reunified Korea is perhaps the most workable scenario toward a peaceful Korean reunification (Tang, *op. cit.*, 464-483).

³⁷ Woosang Kim, “Korea as a Middle Power in the Northeast Asian Security Environment,” G. John Ikenberry and Chung-in Moon, eds.,

The United States and Northeast Asia (New York: Rowman, 2008), 132ff. Alexander Hamilton, one of the American founding fathers, wrote: “The rights of neutrality will only be respected when they are defended by an adequate power” (*The Federalist*, No. 11, 1787).

³⁸ Pyong-choon Hahm, “Korea and the Emerging Asian Power Balance,” *Foreign Affairs*, 50 (January 1972): 346.

³⁹ Lhee Ho-Jeh, “The Prospect of Neutralized Reunification of Korea,” in Han Sung-Joo and Robert J. Myers (eds.), *Korea: The Year 2000. Ethics and Foreign Policy Series 5* (University Press of America, 1987), 105-118.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ “President Opposes Role for USFK in Regional Conflict,” *Korea Times*, March 8, 2005.

⁴² Reudiger Frank, “A New Foreign Policy Paradigm: Perspectives on the Role of South Korea as a Balancer,” *Policy Forum Online* (Nautilus Institute), April 25, 2005.

⁴³ “Prime Minister Seeks Strategic Independence,” *JoongAng Daily*, March 31, 2005. See also Frank, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics of Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Woosang Kim, *op. cit.*, 134.

⁴⁵ Chung Min Lee, *op. cit.*, 21.

⁴⁶ Korea currently spends less than three percent of its GDP on defense.

⁴⁷ See Marcus Noland, Sherman Robinson, and Li-gang Liu, “The Costs and Benefits of Korean Unification – Alternative Scenarios,” *Asian Survey*, 38: 8 (August 1998): 801-814.

⁴⁸ *Yonhap News*, January 27, 2005.

⁴⁹ Song Jian, “Whole-hearted Cooperation for Common Development,” paper presented at the Northeast Asia Economic Forum, February 2-3, 2004, Niigata, Japan.

⁵⁰ Chung, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ Ilhwan Moon and Mark L. Clifford, “Korea’s Young Lions,” *Business Week Online*, February 24, 2003.

⁵² *JoongAng Daily*, April 24, 2004. However, answering the same question, 64% of the lawmakers of the opposition Grand National Party answered that the United States is the most important partner for South Korea while 33% chose China (*JoongAng Daily*, April 29, 2004).

⁵³ For example, see Lee Suhoon, "Mikuki anira jungkukida (Not the United States but China)," *Chosun Ilbo*, April 24, 2004.

⁵⁴ For instance, see David Kang, "Asian Nations' Bandwagon," in *Korea and the Asia-Pacific Region*, eds., Lee-Jay Cho, Myung-Kwang Park and Choong Nam Kim (Seoul: Kyung Hee University Press, 2001), 3-33.

⁵⁵ David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks," *International Security* 27: 4 (Spring 2003): 57-85.

⁵⁶ For examples, see Perry and Yoshihara, *op. cit.*, 100; Richard Betts, "Wealth, Power and Instability," *International Security*, 18: 3 (Winter 1993/94): 34-77; Aaron Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry," *International Security*, 18: 3 (Winter 1993/94): 5-33; and Robert Ross, "The Geography of Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-First Century," *International Security*, 23: 4 (Spring 1999): 81-118.

⁵⁷ Ralph A. Cossa, "The U.S.-ROK Alliance: Future Strategic Role," *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 27 (2005): 197-201; Jae Ho Chung, "South Korea between Eagle and Dragon: Perceptual Ambivalence and Strategic Dilemma," *Asian Survey* 41: 5 (September/October 2001); and Scott Snyder, Sino-Korean Relations and the Future of the US-ROK Alliance, *NBR Analysis* 14: 1 (June 2003) www.nbr.org/publications/analysis/vol14no1/14-1.pdf.

⁵⁸ Victor Cha, "Defense Realism and Japan's Approach toward Korean Reunification," *NBR Analysis*, 14: 1 (June 2003): 23.

⁵⁹ Hahm, *op. cit.*, 346-47.

⁶⁰ Hughes, *op. cit.*, 146.

⁶¹ Norman D. Levin, "Outlook for the ROK-U.S. Alliance," Talking Points at the conference on "New Directions in the ROK-U.S. Relationship," organized by Pacific Forum CSIS, Maui, Hawaii, April 25-27, 2006.

⁶² Bonnie Glaser, "China's Security Perceptions: Interests and Ambitions," *Asian Survey*, 33: 3 (March 1993): 261-262.

⁶³ Jae Cheol Kim, "The Political Economy of Chinese Investment in North Korea," *Asia Survey*, 46:6 (2006): 898-916.

⁶⁴ Selig S. Harrison, *China, Oil and Asia: Conflict Ahead?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 129-36.

⁶⁵ Gilbert Rozman, "Getting the Triangle Right: South Korean Management of the Sino-Japanese Rivalry," *EAI Working Paper Series* 3, East Asian Institute, April 2006, 36.

⁶⁶ During his speech in Seoul, Lee Kuan Yew warned, "China will be doing what Korea is doing now in 20 years." See "Editorial: Listen to Singapore's Lee," *Dona-A Ilbo*, May 20, 2006.

⁶⁷ *Donga Ilbo*, May 4, 2004.

⁶⁸ A report by the Federation of Korean Industries noted China's growth rate in exports to the United States and Japan in autos, textiles, petrochemicals, and shipbuilding at 23.6% and 13.1%, respectively. This rate was exponentially higher than that of the ROK, which managed only 7.4% and 2.7%, respectively. See Scott Snyder, "Happy Tenth for PRC-ROK Relations! Celebrate While You Can Because Tough Times are Ahead," *Pacific Forum CSIS Comparative Connections* (3rd quarter 2002).

⁶⁹ Pollack and Lee, *op. cit.*, 89-90.

⁷⁰ There was a consensus among Korean participants at the conference on "New Directions in the ROK-U.S. Relationship," Maui, Hawaii, April 25-27, 2006.

⁷¹ *Global Review 2004: South Korean Survey* (Seoul: East Asian Institute, 2004).

⁷² The Chicago Council, *op. cit.*, 37.

⁷³ Lee Nae-Young, "Public Opinion about the ROK-U.S. Relations," *Challenges Posed by the DPRK for the Alliance and the Region* (Washington, D.C.: Korea Economic Institute, 2005), 5.

⁷⁴ Michael O'Hanlon, "Keep U.S. Forces in Korea after Reunification," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 10: 1 (Summer 1998): 5-19.

⁷⁵ Michishita Narushige, "Alliance after Peace in Korea," *Survival* 41: 3 (autumn 1999): 68-83.

⁷⁶ Cossa, *op. cit.*, 199-200.

⁷⁷ The Chicago Council, *op. cit.*, 7-9.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 229.

⁷⁹ Fazal, *op. cit.*, 229.

⁸⁰ Victor D. Cha and Chaibong Hahm, “The Future of the United States–Republic of Korea Alliance,” in *Alliance Tomorrow: Security Arrangements after the Cold War*, edited by Yoichi Funabashi (Tokyo: Tokyo Foundation, 2001), 61-85.

⁸¹ On the U.S.-Japan-Korea trilateral security relationship see Victor D. Cha, *Alignment despite Antagonism: The United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Ralph Cossa, ed. *U.S.-Korea-Japan Relations: Building toward a “Virtually Alliance,”* Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 1999; and *Strengthening U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Relations*, Working Group Report, CSIS International Security Program, Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2002.

⁸² See <http://www.mocie.go.kr/english>; and Mark E. Manyin, “South Korea–U.S. Economic Relations: Cooperation, Friction, and Future Perspectives,” *CRS Report for Congress*, Congress Research Service, July 2004.

⁸³ “US Troop Withdrawal Will Double Defense Burden,” *Chosun Ilbo*, July 8, 2003.

⁸⁴ Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP), *Hannikwandkeyka Woori Kyuonjaeae Michineun Younghyang* (The Impact of the ROK–U.S. Alliance on South Korea’s Economy) (Seoul: KIEP, 2004).

⁸⁵ Frank, *op. cit.*

⁸⁶ Woosang Kim, *op. cit.*, 132-4.

⁸⁷ “The U.S.–ROK Alliance: Building a Mature Partnership,” *INSS Special Report*, National Defense University, March 2004. For detailed analysis of the U.S.–ROK alliance diversification, see Charles M. Perry, Jacquelyn K. Davis, James L. Schoff, and Toshi Yoshihara, *Alliance Diversification and the Future of the U.S.-Korean Security Relationship*, Brassey’s, Inc., 2004.

⁸⁸ “Monthly JoonAng Survey Research on US-Korea Alliance,” <http://www.mansfieldfdn.org/polls/poll-05-5.htm>. According to an August 2006 survey of 395 opinion leaders in Korea, 74% believes that “the alliance deteriorated since the beginning of the Roh administration.”