Alliance Adjustment in the Post-Cold War Era: Convergence of Strategic Perceptions and Revitalization of the ROK–US Alliance

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The ROK–US alliance has survived the tumultuous periods following the demise of the Cold War international order and morphed into what both countries identify as a global, value-based partnership. Skeptical assessments of the alliance’s future seemed to have overlooked a number of factors. First, domestic politics can make a big difference; political leadership can play a crucial role in salvaging or damaging alliance partnership. Second, the importance of shared values and identities looms larger in modern alliances. States tend to ally with others to cope with uncertainties, not necessarily to counter manifest threats. Alliances can survive the disappearance of the common threats that had given rise to the alliances and they can be sustained in order to further various interests. All these factors and dynamics help account for why the ROK–US alliance has survived the post-Cold War adversity. Nevertheless, these factors alone come short of explaining why the alliance has elevated to a core of US security strategy in the region; they do not explain why the alliance once again has come to occupy the very heart of the ROK’s security strategy. It was the divergent strategic perceptions that mostly frayed the alliance in the first place, and it was the convergence of strategic perceptions that brought the alliance back together.

Key words: ROK–US relations, alliance theory, ROK’s foreign policy, US foreign policy, US–China relations.

Introduction

The ROK–US alliance once likened by a former senior US diplomat to a marriage “closer to a divorce” in 2006 was exalted as the “linchpin” of security for the Pacific by the US president in 2010.1 The 50th anniversary of the alliance in

1. In 2006, Kurt Campbell, former US deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asia and the Pacific, reportedly likened the ROK and the United States to a king and queen who were close to an official
2003 prompted a number of celebrative seminars and public speeches, but there was little doubt that one of the most successful alliances in history was under stress and in disarray. Despite the efforts of many in both countries to salvage the partnership, the seeming lack of trust and common vision was clouding the future of the alliance. As the alliance reached its 60th anniversary in 2013, however, the mood in the two countries was much more upbeat and experts were generally sanguine about the future of the alliance. With its renewed mission as moving beyond the peninsular affairs to contributing to regional stability and the global public good, both the ROK and the United States did seem to have successfully found a new raison d’etre of the alliance as a value-based, global partnership. How did this happen? How can we explain this reversal of fortune for the ROK–US alliance once declared as defunct by many skeptics? What had transpired to the alliance in the 10-years span between the 50th and 60th anniversaries? The objective of this paper is to examine some of the more fundamental factors that contributed to the resuscitation of the ROK–US alliance as the alliance celebrated its 60th-anniversary. Convergence of strategic perceptions between the two countries seemed to have been most instrumental in resuscitating the alliance among a number of other important factors.

This paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews previous theoretical attempts and research efforts to make sense of the post-Cold War alliance in general and the ROK–US alliance specifically. The ROK–US alliance survived tumultuous times in the early post-Cold War years and was revived as what is dubbed as a global partnership. The aim of the third section is to explore some of the more fundamental elements that contributed to resuscitation of the ROK–US alliance. The last section emphasizes the importance of common strategic perceptions toward North Korea and China in order for the alliance to have continuous viability even in the age of global alliance.

**Evolution of ROK–US Alliance in the Post-Cold War Era: Theoretical Assessments**

*IR Theories and Alliances after the Cold War*

Alliance, in realists’ parlance, is nothing more than a mundane agreement, oftentimes transient in nature, entered into by states to cope with common external threats. If such threats or threat perceptions cease to exist, so will the alliance

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because “alliances have no meaning apart from the adversary threat to which they are a response.” Therefore, it is a small wonder that most of the scholarly works in the realist tradition predicted the demise of Cold War alliances subsequent to the disintegration of Cold War international order. The Warsaw Pact did collapse with the Soviet Union, but most of the United States’ Cold War alliances survived, which sparked lively academic debates to make sense of this anomaly. In the eyes of neoliberalists, alliance as institution, once developed full-fledgedly, takes on a life of its own, adapts to a new environment, and adopts new missions. For instance, the institutional underpinnings of NATO are flexible enough to tackle a host of post-Cold War security problems but hardly replaceable because of “asset specificity.” Over the Cold War years, NATO had developed a host of institutional assets that were not just specific to the Soviet threat but general enough to deal with many post-Cold War security problems. Constructivists have paid attention to the role of identities and values that the US Cold War alliances have come to share and espouse. Identities and values were as important as the threat perceptions that brought together NATO allies in the first place. Or it could have well been the common threat perceptions that gave rise to alliances, but over the course of years, they grew to acquire similar values and a sense of “we-feeling” that in turn became the source of durability for alliance partnership. Constructivist as well as neoliberalist accounts would concede that the origins of alliances ought to be traced back to shared threats (or threat perceptions), but the sustainability of them could only be accounted for by factoring in institutional resilience and flexibility (neoliberalist) or the intersubjective nature of alliance partnership (constructivist). After all, realists had been mostly interested in why alliances rise and fall, but not in how they transform.

Despite the theoretical attempts to fill the void left by realist theories, why and how alliances survive the threats that had given rise to them, and how they are sustained are still understudied and undertheorized. For instance, focusing primarily on institutional characters of alliance, neoliberal theory downplays the interactive nature of the alliance relationship, thereby failing to explain the ways in which alliance partnership transforms. The constructivist explanation may confuse the product of alliance with the producer of it. Besides, much theoretical endeavor in the post-Cold War era has been devoted to the explanation of NATO’s future and potential for evolution. The ROK–US alliance, like other Cold War alliances of the United States, has failed to stimulate such lively inter-theoretical discussions in international relations (IR).

Analyzing the ROK–US Alliance after the Cold War

Although there would not be a dearth of insights to be gleaned from inter-paradigm debates in IR as to why and how alliances survive and evolve, debates on the fate of the ROK–US alliance has been fairly limited to assessing why the alliance has come to the brink of falling apart and how to rescue it. The latter part of the debate has proceeded in a rather haphazard manner without clear order of importance and vision, while the former emphasized how the end of the Cold War affected threat perceptions in both countries, hence the alliance, and also how domestic factors – political leadership, public opinion, the ROK’s assertiveness as new economic power, etc. – have aggravated the situation. With evaporation of common threat perception, realists stipulated that the ROK–US alliance was something that will naturally wither away. Some even suggested that both countries waste no time and call it quits. In the absence of common threats, prolonging the alliance only amplifies the danger of entrapment. North Korea without the Cold War patronage poses no vital threat to US strategic interests, particularly now that its much stronger southern counterpart can and should singlehandedly shoulder the burden of countering its threats. The alliance will therefore entrap the United States into fighting an unnecessary war in Korea, a war that should be considered a strictly peninsular affair. The alliance commitment is to fritter away the scarce resources of the United States on peripheral concerns. Fear of entrapment was also conspicuous in the writings and words of some Korean scholars and pundits. The whole “strategic flexibility” debate on the United States Forces in Korea (USFK) had revolved around how such modification could dangerously drag the ROK into US–China military confrontation over the Taiwan Straits and possibly other con-

7. Shared identities may well have been the products of alliances, not producers of them. Values alone cannot overhaul the alliance in the absence of mutual threats or interests.

tingencies all around the world. Those contingencies may be of importance to the US interests but not to the ROK’s, so it was just not fair for the alliance to be transformed in a way that the ROK can get embroiled in conflicts off the Korean peninsula.

Rather than subscribing to grand theories of IR, a number of researches mobilized more specific alliance theories, such as the “entrapment–abandonment” and “security–autonomy” trade-off models to illustrate the ROK’s dilemma in dealing with the alliance in the post-Cold War security environment. To some Koreans, danger of entrapment was graver than that of abandonment, but still to others, it was vice versa. At the aggregate level, however, the ROK’s attitude was that of ambivalence: it appeared that the ROK wanted to avoid both entrapment and abandonment, although there is trade-off between the two in alliance relations. The same can be said to the security–autonomy trade-off. It seemed as if the ROK wanted to augment autonomy while at the same time wanting to maintain the Cold War-level security commitments from the United States. This looked ambivalent and paradoxical in the eyes of US observers. In contrast, some Korean observers pointed out that there has not been fair trade-offs on either the “entrapment–abandonment” or “security–autonomy” continuums. The ROK was willing to sacrifice security to a certain extent and attempted to enhance autonomy in return but to no avail. Likewise, the increase in danger of entrapment was not accompanied by a decrease in fear of abandonment. The preponderance of power and strategic leeway that the United States possesses in the unipolar world is accountable for such unfair trade-offs. Without the Cold War threat of bipolar order, US security guarantees to alliance partners cease to function as public goods, in which case the United States enjoys an ample amount of strategic freedom, and the free-riding of US alliance partners is seldom tolerated. Alliance politics is no longer a necessity but a choice to the United States. As the more dominant alliance partner unconstrained by Cold War bipolar “structural threats,” the United States would have “residual rights of control” that enable it to dictate the terms of the


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alliance.11 This is particularly true of the ROK–US partnership wherein the asymmetric nature of the alliance is still very much intact, if not worsened.12 The ROK’s security strategy is in need of retooling in the post-Cold War era, but influential “constituencies” that the alliance has created since its inception make it virtually self-perpetuating.13 With the benefit of hindsight, the skeptics seemed to have overlooked the fact that strategic perceptions of both countries had remained in a state of flux long after the Cold War international order had come to an end. As illustrated in the following pages, resuscitation of the ROK–US alliance is greatly attributable to convergence of strategic perceptions between the two countries. And yet, there is a paucity of in-depth research that delves into the manner in which strategic perceptions affected the ROK–US alliance, particularly during the period of reinvigoration in late 2000s and early 2010s. As much as a common strategic perception is a necessary condition for alliance formation, it is instrumental for the alliance to be sustained, even after the initial circumstances have undergone significant changes.14 The next section traces how the change in perception in both countries affected the alliance in the post-Cold War era with analytic emphasis on the period of resuscitation.

**Strategic Perceptions and Changes in the Alliance**

*Diverging Perceptions in the Early Post-Cold War Era*

The US strategy during the Cold War era was geared toward prevailing in global competition with the former Soviet Union. Disintegration of the Cold War international order was therefore hailed as vindication of the decades-long containment strategy, but at the same time it presented a set of new strategic challenges to the United States. The debate in both academia and policy-making circles revolved around at least a couple of questions. First, it was debated whether maintaining the preponderant if not hegemonic status of US power was in the best interests of the

14. Among a number of variables that contribute to the enduring alliance, shared perception seems to be the most important. See Stephen M. Walt, *op. cit.*, pp. 157–159.
United States. Second, the debate also centered on what constituted vital security threats to the United States in the post-Cold War era. The ROK, in a similar manner, did its share of soul-searching for a new strategic initiative. Attempting to diversify its diplomatic portfolios hitherto skewed mostly toward the United States, the ROK made friendly gestures toward Russia and China and established formal ties with them in 1991 and 1993, respectively. After acquiring membership in the UN simultaneously in 1991, two Koreas signed the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation in 1992, a major breakthrough in inter-Korean relations. Changed environments in the post-Cold War era compelled both the ROK and United States to redefine strategic imperatives and sources of security concerns. When their perceptions of core security concerns diverged, so did their views toward the alliance.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s it seemed that there was an air of uncertainty in the United States about the proper place of Asia in its grand strategic design. To some observers, the United States had lost geopolitical interests in Asia as the strategic focus has shifted from “geopolitics to geoeconomics” in the region. As the economic interests took precedence over security concerns, the bilateral security alliances of the United States in the region had lost much of their strategic value as well. The allies of the United States would “go from being linchpins of US security in the region to being mere levers to open markets in the region.” It is well publicized that in these still early days of the post-Cold War era, the United States contemplated a phased but complete withdrawal of US military presence from Asia. The US Congress adopted the “Nunn–Warner Amendment” that mandated withdrawal of the US forces in Asia. In response, the US Department of Defense (DoD) released the East Asian Strategic Initiative (EASI) I in 1990, which envisaged a three-stage restructuring plan that involved a virtual withdrawal of US military commitment from the ROK’s defense against the North Korean threat. The EASI I met vehement opposition from the ROK, which still saw North Korea as a clear and present danger to its security.

North Korea’s nuclear ambition led to the rewriting of the US East Asian strategy; the EASI II, released in 1992 in the wake of first North Korean nuclear crisis, postponed the scheduled three-stage withdrawal, but suggested that the ROK be more responsible in coping with the

18. During the 1990s the US DoD released East Asian Strategy Reports (EASRs) in 1990, 1992, 1995, and 1998. The first two EASRs are also known as Nunn–Warner reports collectively and also as EASI I and II, respectively. The official title of EASI I is “A Strategic Framework for the Asian Pacific Rim: Looking Toward the 21st Century.” The 1995 EASR is also known as the Nye Report, which confirms the US military commitment to Asia.

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conventional threats of the North. But in the end, the United States came to a reaffirmation that Asia was of great strategic value, not just in terms of economic benefits but also in geopolitical interests. The 1993 “Bottom-Up Review” emphasized the necessity of the US forward troop presence in Asia to protect the vital interests of the United States in the region. Nye made it clear that “America’s interests in the region must be protected and America’s commitments will be honored. History, geography and demography make the United States an integral part of the region.”

The 1995 EASR scrapped the previous plan to withdraw and pledged to retain 100,000 US troop presence in Asia. American military commitment in the form of forward presence was deemed necessary to counter the rise of China and developments of nuclear weapons capabilities of North Korea. The Nye Report came as a relief in the ROK, but it was more reassuring to Japan than to the ROK. Although stability of the Korean peninsula was deemed important to the Asia-Pacific, the report portrayed the US–Japan alliance as the cornerstone of peace and stability in the region. North Korea was once again registered as a threat to the United States, not as an Asian frontier of communism, but as a proliferator of weapons of mass destruction. Be it from nuclear or conventional capabilities, the nature of the North Korean threat to the ROK, however, did not change. Therefore, when the Clinton administration approached the North’s nuclear program with a series of seeming appeasement policies, it was received by the Kim Young-sam government with skepticism and apprehension. The Kim government’s perception toward the North was ambivalent at best; in his inauguration speech, Kim declared, “no alliance is better than a people united.” The Kim government toyed with sentimental nationalism toward the North, but soon called for stern measures toward the North, short of military means. The United States for its own part underestimated the resilience of the North and entertained “North Korean endism,” which assumed the North would soon follow the fate of former satellite states of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. Perceptions toward the North were not convergent during the


era of Clinton and Kim, but the perception gap between the two countries became widest in the years of succeeding presidency in both countries.

**Sunshine Policy Meets Bush Doctrine**

To the Bush administration, North Korea was just another rogue state on the axis of evil of which the danger needed to be dealt with in a proactive if not preemptive manner. However, to the governments of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, North Korea was a fellow brethren country and a partner with which to build a reunified Korea in a peaceful manner. At one time, Koreans were more worried about the danger posed by the US reaction to the North Korean nuclear programs than about North Korean nuclear weapons themselves. Leadership in both countries reinforced such perception by making unwanted comments that fueled suspicion of each other’s intention. When President Roh remarked that “there was some validity to the North’s argument that its nuclear and missile programs are intended to deter outside threats,” he sounded as if he was speaking on behalf of the North. When President Bush likened Kim Jong-il to a “pygmy” and “a spoiled child at a dinner table” and the country as an “outpost of tyranny,” he sounded as if he was ready to venture into another war of preemption on the Korean peninsula. Polls and surveys in the 1990s and early 2000s demonstrate that ROK–US relations were fraying. According to a poll by *Joongang ilbo* and the East Asian Institute (EAI) in 2002, more than half of the respondents said that the USFK should be withdrawn.

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25. Forty-four point six percent and 6.3% agreed on phased withdrawal and immediate withdrawal, respectively, whereas 27% and 21% supported permanent deployment and temporary deployment, respectively. *Joongang ilbo* (18 December 2002). However, the poll conducted in June 2003 indicates that anti-Americanism had subsided and more Koreans saw the need for the alliance and USFK deployment. Sixty-one percent of respondents supported USFK deployment, while 35% supported withdrawal in a poll conducted in June 2003. However, 46.3% still responded that the United States was the country that was most obstructive to the unification of Korea, whereas 25.1% replied that it was North Korea. About 90% supported Status of Forces Agreement amendment. *Joongang ilbo* (11 June 2003). For similar results, see *Hankook ilbo* (22 February 2004).
The September 2003 Gallup poll results were astounding. Eighty-five percent of respondents replied that anti-Americanism was necessary to rectify the unequal nature of ROK–US relations. Thirty-eight percent viewed Bush as posing more threats to the Korean peninsula than Kim Jong-il.\(^2\) The low standing of the United States was compounded by a series of accidents and crimes committed by USFK soldiers and subsequent mismanagement of the incidents. Bush’s unilateralism was also a source of anti-Americanism; among Asian countries, the ROK was mostly opposed to the US War against Terror.\(^2\) Of course, rampant anti-Americanism of this sort soon subsided, but there was little doubt that the alliance was drifting apart. Although one can say that the alliance was never on the verge of collapse, an EAI poll in 2006 indicated that 74 percent of foreign policy and security experts in the ROK responded that the alliance had weakened since the inauguration of the Roh administration.\(^2\) It is noteworthy that at one point, the United States was perceived as posing more threats to peace in Korea than were North Korea and China. The perceptions toward China as well as North Korea had improved significantly, while those toward the United States were deteriorating.

While the ROK was carrying out soul-searching with the rising China, the United States had made the strategic decision to discourage China from ascending to hegemonic status in the region.\(^2\) NYT Maintaining a forward troop presence in the region was deemed necessary to cope with a host of post-Cold War security threats, including the rise of China. In contrast, China was increasingly perceived by the ROK as an economic opportunity and also a strategic partner for peninsular affairs. Historically, the periods of conflict and instability on the Korean peninsula and also in the region coincided with the periods of China’s descent. China’s rise therefore should be welcomed and even encouraged. First, as the largest trading partner of the ROK, China presented enormous economic opportunities.\(^3\) Second, China was viewed as an alternative to the United States as strategic partner; therefore the ROK–US alliance should not work as a stumbling block between the


\(^30\) China surpassed the United States as the largest trading partner of the ROK; Youkyung Lee, “AP IMPACT: China Surpasses US as Top Global Trader,” Associated Press (3 December 2012), at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/10554597> (searched date: 12 May 2013).
ROK and China.\textsuperscript{31} In the short run, China was expected to play the role of honest arbitrator to broker a peaceful resolution to the North Korean nuclear crisis whilst the United States was viewed as willing to escalate military conflicts on the Korean peninsula over the nuclear issue.\textsuperscript{32} In the long run, China was expected to play a more constructive role in the reunification of the two Koreas than the United States. Uncertainties surrounding China’s rise present significant challenges to the ROK, but as one China expert in Korea pointed out, “despite the formidable threats that China may pose for Korea, no trace of concern for South Korea’s security [was] evident in Seoul.”\textsuperscript{33} Some in the ROK remained skeptical of China and called for strengthening the ROK–US alliance, but it seemed that the country as a whole was drawn toward China in late 1990s and early 2000s, hence the term “China fever.” In 2004, 55 percent of the newly elected members of the ROK’s National Assembly viewed China as the most important diplomatic partner of the country in the future.\textsuperscript{34} Those who thought of China as an important strategic partner did not call for immediate scrapping of the ROK–US alliance, but it was imperative that the alliance should not work as a stumbling block toward building closer relations with China. To the ruling elites within the Roh Moo-hyun government, the alliance was no longer the centerpiece of the grand strategy of the country. Roh himself said, “The power equation in Northeast Asia will change depending on the choices we make . . . ROK could mediate in a war between the US and North.”\textsuperscript{35} Such rhetoric deteriorated the already damaged relationship and estranged even those in the United States who had been favorable to the alliance.\textsuperscript{36} The ROK was a “runaway


\textsuperscript{32} China kept a low profile toward the first Korean nuclear crisis, but had become more proactive in brokering a peaceful settlement for the second crisis. It seemed that at least on the principle of peaceful and diplomatic resolution to the nuclear crisis, the strategic interests of the ROK and China were convergent.


ally,” a country “governed increasingly in accordance with graduate-school ‘peace studies’ desiderata.”

Converging Perceptions Toward North Korea and China

As the 20th century was winding to a close, however, the ROK grew increasingly disenchanted with North Korea. A series of North Korean provocations reinvigorated the perception that despite 10 years of Sunshine Policy, the nature of North Korea’s threat had not changed and the North’s assertiveness and provocation in fact fed on the Sunshine Policy. Among many acts of the North’s provocations, the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 subsequent to the sinking of the Cheonan corvette was the most blatant military provocation against the ROK since the signing of the ceasefire agreement in 1953, and was considered a virtual act of war. North Korean provocations in 2010, which produced sizable casualties, including two civilians, were surefire confirmation that the North’s threat to the South’s security was still very real. In fact, in the ROK’s public opinion there is a discernible pattern between the status of inter-Korean relations and the support for the ROK–US alliance. When the ROK perceives growing threats from the North, it demonstrates increasing support for the alliance. In contrast, inter-Korean rapprochement is accompanied by lackadaisical support for the alliance. As such, it was “after North Korean provocations in 2009 and 2010” that the ROK “has emerged as the most important Asian ally of the United States in the region.”

As the tension between two Koreas escalated, the ROK also became increasingly disillusioned with China; “China option” as a viable “strategic alternative” began to lose much of its appeal in the ROK’s public opinion. There are a number


38. The ROK’s threat perception toward the North was proportional to north provocations, which in turn was proportional to the support for the alliance. This pattern culminated in the period immediately following the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island and was very much visible after the third nuclear testing of the North in 2013; Han-wool Jeong and Won-chil Jeong, “Yeoron josa-reul tonghae-bon 2009 anbo wigi-wa kookmin yeoron [Public Opinion Survey on 2009 National Security Crisis and Public Opinion],” EAI Opinion Review Series 200903-01 (March 2009), pp. 2–4, at <http://www.eai.or.kr/data/bbs/kor_report/200905271494992.pdf> (searched date: 12 May 2013); Nae-Young Lee and Han-wool Jeong, “Fluctuating Anti-Americanism and the Korea-US Alliance,” International Studies Review, 5-2 (October 2004), pp. 23–40. If North Korea wants to drive the wedge between the United States and the ROK, provocations certainly have backfired by reinforcing the ROK–US alliance.


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of reasons that the ROK’s love affair with China turned out to be a short-lived fling. They include the following:

Tariff disputes arising from Chinese flooding of South Korea garlic markets in 2000; China’s controversial claim to the ancient Korean kingdom of Koguryo in 2004; Chinese violence during the torch relay for the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008; Chinese fishermen’s illegal fishing and the murder of a Korean coast guard in 2011; Chinese repatriation of North Korean defectors; Potential disputes over Socotra Rock in 2012.40

But nothing was more damaging to Sino–ROK relations than North Korean provocations and the seeming aversion of China to fault and contain them. China was once expected to be an honest peace-broker in peninsular affairs, but the ROK’s call for China to intervene and play a constructive role fell on deaf ears. China’s failure to prevent and reprimand the North’s wrongdoings met a barrage of criticism in the ROK and reinforced the ROK’s earlier concern that the North and China are eventually “birds of a feather.” An EAI poll in 2013 suggests that far from being an honest arbitrator, China is perceived to be unreasonably partial to the North by the majority of Koreans.41 Hankook ilbo and a Millward Brown poll suggest that the ROK’s perception of China deteriorated significantly after the Cheonan and Yeonpyoung attacks.42 The majority of Koreans now tend to think that China is not in support of unification and has territorial ambition toward the Korean peninsula. Even after the successful summit meeting between the ROK and China in June 2013, 83 percent of respondents viewed China as the country most impeding the unification of Korea.43 An Asan Report released in

41. Sixty-two point one percent of respondents replied that China was more likely to support the North if military confrontations broke out between the South and the North. See Han-wool Jeong, “Anbo wigi-wa hankuk-in-eui anbo euisik [National Security Crisis and South Korean Public’s Security Perceptions],” EAI Issue Briefing on Public Opinion, 132 (May 2013), at <http://www.eai.or.kr/data/bbs/kor_report/201305241820168.pdf> (searched date: 15 May 2013). Sixty-five point six percent replied that the ROK–US alliance needed to be strengthened. In cases of confrontations between the United States and China, 45.6% responded that the ROK should support the United States. Only 3% responded that the ROK should support China.
July 2014 after President Xi’s high-profile visit to the ROK also indicates that many Koreans still harbor such reservations despite a series of charm-offensives launched by the Chinese leader. Deterioration of the ROK’s perception toward China coincided with improved US standing and increased support for the ROK–US alliance. After experiencing a series of North Korean provocations beginning with the first nuclear test in 2006, the ROK’s public opinion has increasingly turned back to China in favor of the United States. The shift in such public perception played out as a backdrop against which the Lee Myoung-bak government was able to mend fences with the United States and reinvigorate the alliance (Fig. 1).

The ROK’s maintaining a constructive Sino–ROK relationship is a strategic necessity. The ROK is cognizant of China’s growing importance to the nation’s security as well as economic interests, and thus has taken steps to upgrade the Sino–ROK relationship to that of strategic partnership over the years. But at the same time, the ROK has become increasingly wary that “China’s rise will be a source of instability.” In addition to North Korean security threats, “South Koreans rank the issues of China’s continued rise, China’s military modernization, and...
South Korea’s increasing dependency on China’s economy high on the list of potential security threats to South Korea,45 As long as the ROK perceives China as more of a threat than an opportunity, Korean public opinion will remain positive toward the ROK–US alliance. The ROK’s threat perception of China works to the advantage of the alliance and is welcome to the United States, which has long decided to contain China’s rise to regional hegemon.

The ROK–US alliance is of added importance to the US strategy in the context of hedging against China’s rise. Japan has already placed all its bets on the US–Japan alliance in the region’s geopolitical chess game, but the ROK may hold the casting vote.46 In purely military sense, the US–Japan alliance may be more significant to the United States than the ROK–US alliance. However, as former US Secretary of Defense William Perry suggests, in light of strategic value, no other Asian alliances are more important to the United States than the ROK–US alliance.47 In a similar vein, Kissinger emphasizes the importance of continued US troop presence in the Korean peninsula regardless of how Korea’s future pans out.48 Bush said of the potential of the ROK–US alliance: “It’s going to be very important [that] a 21st century alliance recognizes that China is an opportunity for both nations to engage in a constructive way.”49 In the absence of US military commitments in the region, the ROK may well be dragged into China’s sphere of influence.50 The alliance is a means to keeping the ROK on the US side and to preventing the ROK from drifting toward China.51

51. The Korea–US FTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) are also meant to prevent Korea and other Asian countries from drifting toward China’s sphere of influence. The US military presence in a unified Korea is needed for this purpose.
Importance of Strategic Perceptions in the Era of Global Alliance

Global Interests and Global Alliance

It is a common threat perception that generally gives rise to an alliance, but once an alliance is formed it can endure for a number of different reasons. Over the years, alliance partners may develop a set of new converging interests that they find it convenient to pursue through the existing alliance mechanism. As Morgenthau points out, “whether and for how long [an alliance] will be operative depends upon the strength of the interests underlying it as over against the strength of the other interests of the nations concerned.” Viewed from this rationalist perspective, the ROK–US alliance has weathered out post-Cold War adversity because the benefits still far outweigh the costs. Both the ROK and the United States agreed that the alliance should morph into a comprehensive, value-based, global partnership because both countries share vested interests in doing so. In fact, the global strategic outlook of the two countries in the 21st century is largely compatible; the ROK’s pursuit of “Global Korea” and the “Defense, Diplomacy, and Development (3D)” initiative of the United States are of mutual benefit. The US strategy to maintain preponderance of global influence through network and smart power requires a like-minded partner like the ROK, as the ROK can improve international standing through the US-led global governance. Korea’s soft power engagements will augment the US global leadership, as the United States will be of indispensable assistance to the ROK’s policy to promote soft power. As an important middle power country in the world, the ROK’s national interests are not limited to Northeast Asia, and in recent years the ROK and the United States have been reliable partners on the global stage. When others are toying with the “Beijing model” in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Korea was quick to recover and trumpeted “the virtues of an open market economic model” of the United

States. When the traditional Western allies of the United States balked at the US War on Terror, the ROK committed its military in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon. As the first country in history to go from donee to donor of foreign aid, the ROK is a showcase for the US aid and development policy. For a number of reasons, the ROK has emerged as an attractive alliance partner to the United States in Asia. The support of the United States likewise has been instrumental for the ROK to host the fifth G-20 summit in 2010 and the second Nuclear Security Summit in 2012. Aside from the mutual benefits that both countries can reap, there are many more compelling reasons as to why the ROK–US alliance should be sustained. Above all, the precarious balance of power in the region may break down in the absence of US commitment in Korea. Even China is cognizant of the nature of the alliance as a regional public good.

Political leadership in both countries was also important in resuscitating the alliance. It is true that the alliance was never on the brink of disbanding during the presidencies of Roh and Bush. After all, it was the presidential meeting between Roh and Bush in 2005 in Gyeongju wherein both countries agreed on upgrading the alliance to a comprehensive and strategic one. Roh acceded to a number of important US policy initiatives, including flexibility of USFK and relocation of military bases, and initiated the ROK–US free-trade agreement (FTA) deal at the expense of his own domestic political capital. But it is no secret that the “ideological mismatch” between the two presidents and unwanted rhetoric from them had been sources of stress in the alliance relationship. The personal chemistry between Presidents Lee Myung-bak and Barack Obama has also been instrumental in rejuvenating the alliance relationship; their relationship was unusually amicable to the extent that the New York Times described it as a “man-crush.”

Values, Perceptions, and 21st-Century Alliance

Aside from converging interests, sharing similar values and identities has increasingly become an integral part of the alliance partnership in the modern era. Alliance in the modern era is in flux. Traditionally, alliance was defined as “latent war community” to use military means to cope with manifest threats that are common to alliance partners. Alliances in the 18th and 19th centuries were formed for solely anti-hegemonic and “balance of power” purposes, which explains the transient nature of those alliances. In contrast, values and identities as well as

“balance of power” had been the underlying forces for establishment and unity of the US Cold War alliances. Values and identities account for resilience of the US Cold War alliances in the post-Cold War era. The United States is transforming its hitherto “threat-based” military into a “capability-based” one that is prepared to deal with amorphous and ubiquitous threats of the 21st century. The US alliance therefore intends to cope with uncertainties and contingencies rather than manifest threats of fixed enemies. Under such a strategic environment, birds of a feather do tend to flock together. Since trust proves to be an integral part of such a partnership, values and identities weigh in more heavily in modern day alliances.

Accordingly, the scope of alliance cooperation in the new century has become much broader than in the Cold War era. The 21st-century ROK–US alliance is tasked with such comprehensive missions that dwarf those of the ROK–US alliance during the Cold War era. Recent publications and researches all call for expanding cooperation between the two countries under the framework of 21st century comprehensive alliance to such areas as official development assistance, anti-terrorism and piracy, and green energy, to name a few. Integration of such missions is deemed central to sustaining the alliance in the new century. As Snyder pointed out, “the true benefits of a comprehensive alliance for South Korea” may be “political – not military.” There is no denying the importance of expanding the scope of alliance in both geographic and issue areas. As many suggest, if the alliance is to be revitalized, common values and strategic interests, rather than common threats, should be the basis of rationalizing the renewed raison d’etre of the alliance. But at the same time, it is also questionable whether the alliance could be sustained with common values and global strategic interests alone in the absence of convergent strategic perceptions toward North Korea and China. Integration of global missions may well be a necessary condition for the alliance to endure, but it may not be a sufficient one. We have witnessed how the alliance had strained when the perceptions of the two countries diverged toward the North and China. These threat perceptions may well change in the future, in which case values and other strategic interests may prove insufficient to hold the alliance together. In order for the ROK–US alliance to have continuing viability in the 21st century, it is very important for the two countries to stay on the same page in their perceptions and policies toward the North and China.

64. For instance, see Kurt M. Campbell, et al., op. cit., p. 71; Scott Snyder, Pursuing a Comprehensive Vision for the U.S.-South Korea Alliance (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2009).
65. Ibid.
China Quandary

The China factor will continuously play out as a tough test for the alliance in coming years. The ROK is located in such a geopolitical position that proactive diplomatic partnership with China as well the United States is a strategic must. Extending the relationship with China while reinvigorating the alliance with the United States is much easier said than done. In principle, China opposes foreign troop presence in a sovereign nation, and hence grudgingly condones the US troop presence in the ROK. China, however, thinks that it is in their long-term interest to reduce US influence in Korea and expand its own influence. Circumstantial evidence before and after Xi’s much-celebrated visit to Korea in 2014 suggests that China thinks in the long run it is possible for Korea to be absorbed into its sphere of influence.67 China once identified the alliance as a regional threat, a relic of the Cold War and a stumbling block in the way of a proactive Sino–ROK relationship. A spokesman of China’s foreign ministry reportedly made the comment that “the US Korea alliance is a historic relic. The times have changed and Northeast Asian countries are going through many changes and transformations. We should not approach current security issues with military alliances left over from the past Cold War era.”68 As China is envisioning a new security concept for Asia, it will certainly stay alert to the nature and missions of the evolving ROK–US alliance.69

The ROK is the 12th largest economy and has the sixth largest military in the world. It has grown to an influential middle power on the global stage, but in terms of regional geopolitical metrics, it still is a diplomatic lightweight. By and large, the US–China relation sets the context in which the ROK must make strategic choices.70 Escalation in the Sino–US rivalry can place the ROK in a very precarious strategic position. If the United States does “too much” and if the US policy becomes outright balancing against China, the ROK might face the dilemma of choosing a side.71 The ROK likewise would be tempted to jump on China’s bandwagon, if the US does “too little” in Asia and if the United States’ “offshore balancing” strategy encourages Japan’s penchant for practicing “creative” history. If the offshore balancing strategy of the United States relies too much on Japan’s

69. China’s President Xi proposed at the fourth summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) a new concept of Asian security in May 2014.
71. Recent controversy in the ROK over the pros and cons of participating in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense will prove to be two of many tough choices that the ROK will have to make in the years to come. There is a danger in US policy of doing both too much and too little. Zbigniew Brzezinski, op. cit.
move to a “normal” state, the American presence in East Asia and also the ROK–US alliance may cease to function as public goods that have discouraged an arms race in the region. If the US influence in the region dwindles and China emerges as a benign alternative to the United States, the ROK with other neighbors of China may well bandwagon on China. As Scheweller observes, bandwagoning is quite common in world politics. If the United States loses its preponderance of power and influence, the rest can jump on the China bandwagon and gravitate toward the “wave of the future . . . when the status-quo order starts to unravel,” it is the time when “bandwagons roll” and states pile onto the new hegemon.\(^72\) When the bipolar international order of the Cold War came to an end, most states in the system decided to stay on the US bandwagon because the US unipolar world is based on rules rather than coercion.\(^73\) The future hegemonic struggle will all come down to the matter of who will build a regional order that is more appealing to the member states in the region. It is critical for the United States to be able to project its influence through hard power, but at the same time it is equally important, if not more, to prevail in its competition against China to win the hearts and minds.

Conclusion

The ROK–US alliance endured hardship following the disintegration of the Cold War order, but was able to adjust to new strategic environments of the post-Cold War era. Political leadership in both countries has contributed in no small part to cultivating the moods to find the common grounds for rejuvenating the alliance. The alliance has assumed a new identity and has been upgraded as a value-based, global partnership because both countries have substantial interests in doing so. The uncertain nature of the 21st-century security environment compels the alliance to expand the scope of tasks in both issue and geographic areas. Nevertheless, it was after the perceptions of the ROK and the United States began to converge on North Korea and China that they were able to agree on the rationales for global alliance. This does not mean that the two countries do not share significant interests in expanding the scope of the alliance. The ROK can certainly further its national interests by participating in and contributing to global governance; partnership with the United States is instrumental to the ROK’s policy of “Global Korea.” As the sole superpower constrained by domestic economic woes, the United States is in desperate need of trustworthy alliance partners to share the burden of maintaining the international order to its liking. Convergence of such interests has contributed to the successful metamorphosis of the alliance to a significant extent. But it


seems the convergence of strategic perceptions toward North Korea and China had been indispensable to reinvigorating the alliance. If this observation is valid, it raises an important question concerning the durability of alliance in the absence of shared perceptions toward North Korea and China. If the perceptions concerning North Korea and (or) China diverge once again, the alliance may well begin to fray. The health and longevity of the alliance will therefore depend on the way North Korean problems and China’s rise unfold in the future and the way the alliance deals with them.

References


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