

# **SOUTH KOREA'S PROGRESSIVES AND THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE**

*Hahm Chaibong\**

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*\*Hahm Chaibong is the Director of the Korean Studies Institute and Professor of International Relations and Political Science at the University of Southern California.*

## I. Introduction

As the reigning consensus has it, the U.S.-ROK alliance is one of the most successful of its kind in history. The alliance not only succeeded in defending South Korea from North Korean aggression for over half a century but also oversaw the industrialization and democratization of South Korea as the once impoverished country led by authoritarian leaders grew into the world's 10th-largest economy with a flourishing democracy. It is also the current consensus, however, that the alliance is in trouble.

To be sure, the weakening of the alliance was something that had been foreseen for quite some time. In particular, the end of the Cold War has long been seen as undermining the rationale for the alliance that was forged at its height. The fall of the Soviet Union, China's shift to capitalism, and the collapse of the North Korean economy dramatically illustrated the success of the alliance, but at the same time these events robbed it of reasons for its continued existence. As the sense of a perpetual and imminent security threat that sustained the stand-off between the two Koreas dissipated, the role of the United States on the Korean peninsula became increasingly ambiguous. As the likelihood of an invasion by an economically crippled and politically isolated North Korea decreased dramatically, the U.S. forces, originally placed there to serve as a trip wire that would guarantee full-scale U.S. intervention in the case of a North Korean attack, suddenly seemed superfluous. The alliance became a victim of its own spectacular success.

However, despite the end of the Cold War, the external conditions for the continued success of the alliance still all seem to be in place. With China growing powerful and beginning to play an increasingly active role in the region, Japan recovering from its economic doldrums while seeking to balance China, Russia flush with oil money and wanting to regain some of its old clout in the region, and a nuclear-armed North Korea still a palpable threat to the security and stability of the region, a strong U.S.-South Korea alliance would seem to be the perfect anchor for the security of South Korea and Northeast Asia. Indeed, "contrary to conventional wisdom, the resiliency of the U.S.-ROK alliance is actually overdetermined" (Cha and Hahm 2001, 68). That is, "despite all the efforts at rethinking new rationales and revising components of the alliance to avert future erosion, objectively speaking, the conditions surrounding the Korean peninsula are ideal for maintaining the alliance in the short to medium term" (Cha and Hahm 2001, 68).

What then is the real source of the tensions in the U.S.-South Korean alliance? The causes of current difficulties in the alliance go beyond the changes in the external circumstances, as great and as dramatic as these may have been. The most important reason for the deterioration of the alliance is the sea change in South Korea's domestic politics that has taken place during the past 10 years, one that saw the rise of the

“progressives,” supported by a new generation with views of North Korea and the U.S.–South Korean alliance that are radically different from the views espoused by the older generation. Having grown up amid increasing prosperity with no memory of the Korean War and the ideological warfare that consumed Koreans in the 1950s, South Korea’s younger generation espouses a much more benign view of North Korea and its potential threats to South Korean security.

According to the progressives, mostly supported by the younger generation, the United States was involved in Korea and the region because of its own self-interest, imperial and otherwise. Instead of being seen as a staunch ally that came to South Korea’s rescue in times of its greatest need, the United States is seen as a superpower bully that sustained authoritarian rulers and their cronies in South Korea in an effort to impose its will on the country and the region. Not surprisingly such views have come to have a profoundly corrosive effect on South Korean public’s perception of the United States and the alliance. Such a view, once relegated to the so-called radical leftist fringes of South Korea’s political spectrum, came into the political mainstream with the election of President Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) and then became the majority under the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2004–present). The Sunshine Policy, a policy of engagement with North Korea started by the Kim Dae-jung administration and inherited by Roh, gave full expression to this view (Hahm C. 2005).

## **II. A Turbulent Relationship**

As Daniel Sneider (2006) pointed out in a recent op-ed article, there never was a “golden age” of U.S.-South Korean relations, even at the height of the Cold War. “In reality,” he wrote, “Korean nationalism and American strategic policy goals have often clashed. Differences over North Korea have arisen repeatedly. And anti-Americanism has been a feature of Korean life for decades.” Sneider cited the cases of President Syngman Rhee, who often clashed with Washington, and of President Park Chung-hee, who had sharp differences with the United States over a wide range of issues including “North Korea policy, economic goals, human rights and democracy.” Park even tried to develop nuclear weapons in defiance of the United States. The Kwangju uprising was another thorny issue in the side of U.S.-Korea relations, as the United States was regarded by many South Koreans as acquiescing, if not actively participating, in the brutal crackdown of pro-democracy demonstrations in Kwangju by the military junta led by General Chun Doo-hwan. For its part, many in Washington, both within and outside succeeding administrations and congresses, were highly critical of the authoritarian governments in South Korea and their dismal human rights records.

Despite the fact that U.S.-South Korean relations have always been rocky at best, the one constant in this turbulent relationship that sustained it through the years and

gave it a sense of stability was South Korea's unwavering commitment to the alliance. Syngman Rhee defied the United States numerous times, exasperating its policymakers constantly, but it was always to fight communism harder than the United States was willing to do, and to press for more U.S. aid and greater U.S. involvement in Korean affairs. Park Chung-hee, who by all accounts was at best uncomfortable with the United States, always clung to the United States out of strategic necessity (Oberdorfer 1997, 32–33). He implored the United States to refrain from pulling the Seventh Division from South Korea and started to develop his own arms industry and ultimately nuclear weapons precisely because he feared that the United States might abandon South Korea in the wake of the Vietnam debacle. The suppression of democracy by Park and Chun were justified in the name of a stronger security posture vis-à-vis North Korea.

What was never questioned or in doubt was successive South Korean governments' anti-North Korea stance and their wish to have the United States stay. Indeed, much of the turbulence in the alliance over the years was generated because South Korea would throw a tantrum whenever it perceived the United States to be softening its stance against the North. South Korea's fear of abandonment by the United States was the source of much of the tension in the alliance.

However, that was also precisely what sustained the alliance. As analysts of the U.S.–South Korean alliance have noted, “Fears of abandonment are an inherent part of any alliance relationship, and they are particularly salient in asymmetrical relationships such as that with Korea. . . .” In fact, “if anything, abandonment fears are a sign of a healthy and vibrant alliance—indifference would be more symptomatic of erosion” (Cha and Hahm 2001, 65). The strength of the alliance was based not on a smooth relationship between the two allies who saw eye to eye on most matters but instead on South Korea clinging to the alliance much more strongly than the United States. This, however, no longer seems to be the case.

The current difficulties in the alliance seem to be serious and intractable precisely because South Korea no longer seems to fear abandonment by the United States. In fact, there are many indications that the current government and a good portion of the South Korean public actually want to see the United States leave or at least drastically reduce its presence.<sup>1</sup> The United States, for its part, is increasingly disillusioned with an alliance in which its role is no longer appreciated and one that does not necessarily fit with its new strategic doctrine (Carpenter 2003).

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1. On 19 December 2006, *Hankuk Ilbo* reported on a 2006 poll conducted by the East Asia Institute; the poll found that some 54.9 percent of those surveyed called for a reduction in the number of U.S. troops stationed in Korea.

### III. Lessons of Korean History

As a tributary state of the great Chinese empires of Ming (1368–1644) and Ching (1644–1912), Choson Korea (1392–1910) enjoyed long spells of peace in splendid isolation during its five centuries of existence, punctuated only by two major invasions—one by Japan at the end of the sixteenth century and another by the Ching in the early seventeenth.<sup>2</sup> As devastating and humiliating those wars were, Choson survived both calamities, enjoying a social and cultural renaissance in the eighteenth century. Moreover, the tributary system, in practice, granted Choson almost complete political autonomy from succeeding Chinese empires in exchange for formal acknowledgement of China's status as the center of civilization.

Ironically, it was as Korea emerged from the Chinese sphere of influence to join the ranks of sovereign states that it found itself plunged into the maelstrom of international power politics that would victimize it for the next century. Quite ominously, Korea opened itself to the outside world to become a member of the modern international world order in 1876, when it was forced to conclude the Treaty of Kanghwa with newly emerging Japan.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, unable to chart a course to modernize and strengthen itself sufficiently to defend its interests and sovereignty, Korea became the pawn in an international rivalry among China, Japan, and Russia. The rapid erosion of Korean sovereignty in the late nineteenth century was marked by two major wars that were fought largely on Korean soil for control of the Korean peninsula: the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05).

The naked power struggle for the domination of the Korean peninsula came to an end only when Korea's sovereignty was extinguished by Japan. The end of foreign rule did not bring much respite either. Liberation in 1945, at the end of a 35-year-long colonial rule by Japan, was swiftly followed by U.S. military occupation (1945–48), national division (1945–present), the Korean War (1950–53), and the deep freeze of the Cold War. Such a history impressed upon Koreans the importance of maintaining political sovereignty and independence at all costs:

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2. The Imjin War (1592–99), also called the Hideyoshi invasion, was started when Toyotomi Hideyoshi invaded Korea upon the latter's refusal to grant safe passage for Hideyoshi's army to conquer China. Despite the devastation of the country, Choson was able to ultimately defeat the Japanese with the help of the Ming. In contrast, the Manchu invasion (1636–37,) also called the "Byongja barbarian invasion," lasted for only two months. Even though the physical destruction was much less than during the Hideyoshi invasion, the psychological impact of the war was far greater as the Choson king, Injo, had to surrender in person to the invading Ching emperor, promising loyalty to Ching as its vassal.

3. Not only did Japan force the opening of Korea, but Japan also helped Korea achieve formal suzerainty in 1895 when, in the Treaty of Shimonoseki signed between Ching China and Japan at the conclusion of the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), Japan forced China to acknowledge that Korea was no longer a tributary state of Ching but an independent sovereign state.

It is the sad fate of Korea to be stuck in the midst of [China, Russia, and Japan], continuously victimized by their dehumanizing and destructive violence. One hears Japanese describe the Korean peninsula as a dagger pointed at Japan's heart or a pistol aimed at her head. At the same time, Chinese and Russians regard it as a bridge over which Japanese militarism has exploded all over the Asian continent. Thus, the peninsula has always been described as a chronic source of international conflict and military violence. And yet, Korea by herself has never been a threat to anyone. She becomes a threatening dagger or pistol aimed at Japan only if she falls into the hands of China or Russia. By the same token, it is a bridge for the Japanese military that Korea has been a menace to China or Russia. The Korean people have never threatened their neighbors; they have always wished merely to be left alone. Indeed, it was her smallness and military weakness that made her a source of trouble in East Asia at the beginning of the [last] century (Hahm P. 1972, 344–45).

Thus, for both North and South Korea, despite their implacable mutual hostility and ideological differences, the construction and maintenance of a viable independent nation-state has been the common goal. In the North such a goal found expression in the *juche* ideology, while in the South it was embodied in the idea of *jaju* (self-reliant) national defense and economic development.

Another important lesson learned was the need to play the balance-of-power game well. A strong military and a thriving economy are not enough because no matter how powerful its military and how prosperous its economy, Korea by itself could never be a match for its giant neighbors. The only way Korea can overcome the fate imposed on it by geopolitics and yet maintain independence and peace is by playing the international power game with finesse. The dire consequences of misplaying its hand in this regard had been made all too clear. Moreover, the lessons of which particular game to play and which ones to avoid were also made clear by history. For example, one means by which Korea tried to stave off the great powers from encroaching upon its sovereignty was to declare international neutrality.<sup>4</sup> However, “inasmuch 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” (Hahm P. 1972, 346).

The lesson learned was that “unless a state has sufficient military capability to guarantee its own neutrality, its neutrality is entirely at the mercy of its more powerful neighbors”

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4. Yu Kil-jun, a leading advocate of modernization in late Choson period, wrote a treatise entitled “On Neutrality.” Syngman Rhee (1912), the first president of the Republic of Korea, wrote a doctoral thesis at Princeton University entitled *Neutrality as Influenced by the United States*. The thesis was published in 1912 by the Princeton University Press under the same title.

(Hahm P. 1972, 345–46). Another policy that has been tried “with equally disastrous consequences” was “the dangerous game of playing the three powers off against one another” (Hahm P. 1972, 346). Such a policy was dangerous and ultimately ineffective because it “only intensified the mutual distrust and belligerence among the three powers and encouraged the fear that Korea might at any time undermine the position of one in the peninsula by snuggling up to one of the others,” and “thus reinforcing their desire to extinguish Korea’s political independence” (Hahm P. 1972, 346).<sup>5</sup>

Based on these lessons of history, the geopolitical strategy to be adopted by Korea became clear:

The first principle is Korea’s nonalignment, especially in the military sense, with any of the three immediately surrounding powers. . . . There is no question that Korea must maintain normal and amicable relations with all three of her neighbors. 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 by the other two. Intensification of tension and hostility would promptly follow. Korea would again become a source of instability and war (Hahm P. 1972, 346–47).

How is Korea to maintain its independence without allying itself with any of her immediate neighbors?

A very important corollary of this principle of Korea’s non-alignment with the Asian powers is her very close special relationship to the United States. To put it more bluntly, a close alignment with the United States is the only practicable way for Korea to remain nonaligned with any of her immediate neighbors (Hahm P. 1972, 347).

This indeed was the strategic thinking that sustained the earlier, more successful phase of the U.S.-South Korean alliance.

#### **IV. Progressives’ View**

The two succeeding governments of President Kim Dae-jung and President Roh Moo-hyun and the progressive coalition that supports them hail from a school of thought that regards the role of the United States in modern Korean history with far

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5. It is interesting to note that both the neutrality argument and the balancer argument have been recurrent themes in Korean debate. That South Korea could and should play the role of the balancer in Northeast Asia was most recently revived by President Roh Moo-hyun; see, for example, Blue House (2005).



greater suspicion. For them, the United States was anything but a disinterested outside power on whom South Korea could depend as the outside balancer. Rather, the United States has been involved in South Korean politics from the very beginning, intervening in the most direct and crude fashion and imposing its will on the Korean people and society.

The starting point of the progressives' analysis of U.S. intervention in Korean politics is the immediate post-liberation period (1945–48) during which the United States imposed a direct military rule over South Korea. During this period, Korea's "nationalist leaders, whether conservative or Communist, all aimed to establish an independent nation-state and rid Korea of all vestiges of colonial rule" (Choi 1993, 17). The result was the emergence of "a common vocabulary and a political scene not yet split along rigid ideological lines" (Choi 1993, 17). However, the intervention of the United States (and the USSR) "rather than facilitating the emergence of a national consensus, polarized the political terrain and made it impossible for various Korean groups to consolidate around a common axis of nationalism" (Choi 1993, 17). This it did by "refusing to deal with the Korean People's Republic organized and led by revolutionary nationalists" and instead committing itself to Syngman Rhee and the "wealthy elites organized around Hanmindang (The Korea Democratic Party)" that included a "large pool of Koreans who had served the Japanese as administrators and functionaries" (Choi 1993, 17). Thus,

The U.S. occupation meant salvation for the Japanese collaborators, while for the Korean people, it meant the restoration and strengthening of the colonial structures of domination and control. The U.S. military government, in its bid to will the future of Korea, imposed its own agenda on Korean politics. Liberation, then, brought but a temporary reprieve from the intimidation and violence of the coercive state apparatuses, causing civil society to become rapidly alienated from the U.S. military government and its Korean allies (Choi 1993, 18).

The United States exacerbated the cleavages and tensions in South Korean politics by creating a separate regime in the South that "privileged the establishment of a capitalist market economy and an anti-Communist state over the establishment of a democratic political order" (Choi 1993, 20) when "the vast majority of Koreans, except those allied with the U.S. military government, would not accept capitalism and anti-communism if instituting them meant preserving the colonial structure of land ownership and division of the country" (Choi 1993, 19).

Such an interpretation of history leads to a view of the Korean War that is central to the progressives' worldview:



The Korean War, then, should not be interpreted as a confrontation between liberal democracy and communism, but, on one level, as a violent attempt to restore relationships of power established soon after 1945—relationships that had been established before the *distorting influence* exerted by division and the occupation by U.S. and Soviet troops (Choi 1993, 21 [emphasis added]).

The South Korean state itself, which survived the war only because of a massive U.S. intervention, limped along with U.S. aid and the coercive state apparatuses of the authoritarian regimes:

After the war, the capitalist system of production was linked up with the world market economy led by the United States; the military establishment was newly incorporated into the state structure; and the entire governing structure of the state achieved a good deal of legitimacy, largely obscuring its *fundamentally illegitimate historical origins* (Choi 1993, 24 [emphasis added]).

The contrast between the traditional, more conservative views and the more recent progressive views of the role of the United States in Korea could not be greater. The conservatives found the United States to be “unique in that it was far enough away from Korea to have a friendly relationship, relatively free of tension and strain, between the two countries, but was involved enough in the Asian affairs to be a Pacific power” (Hahm P. 1972, 347). This allowed Koreans to “use the United States as a means to break out of the suffocating geopolitical encirclement by the three Asian powers” (Hahm P. 1972, 347). Moreover, the “United States was in an ideal position to play the role of a peacemaker, or a referee, on the Korean peninsula, keeping the Asian powers from coming to blows” (Hahm P. 1972, 347). For their part, the progressives argue that:

the division and occupation of Korea by Soviet and U.S. troops . . . completely undermined the Korean people’s efforts to establish an independent political system. The division of Korea along the Thirty-Eighth Parallel was unilaterally declared by the United States as a part of its postwar global strategy. In this way, without having given their consent, the Korean people became victims of U.S. and Soviet strategic interests (Choi 1993, 15).

Thus, United States was actually the power that most heavily intervened in South Korean politics and shaped it against the wishes of the vast majority of the people.

What are the policy consequences of such a view of history? Like that of the conservatives, the progressives’ view of modern Korean history lays a heavy emphasis

on national sovereignty and self-determination. However, the progressives' view of the role of the United States leads the adherents of this view to equate the achievement of true national sovereignty with ending U.S. interference in Korean affairs. A direct dialogue between the South and the North—symbolically encapsulated by the 2000 summit meeting between South Korea's president, Kim Dae-jung, and North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-il—is the only means by which Koreans can debate and determine their own fate without the interference of outside powers, especially the United States, which is always ready to meddle and intervene in Korean affairs to the detriment of the interests of the Korean people. Hence, a policy of disengagement from the United States and engagement with North Korea is the logical end state of the progressives' understanding of Korean national self-determination and nationalism. They believe this is the only way to restore things to the way they were, and should have been, before the “distorting influence” of the United States.

## V. Changing Roles

The end of the Cold War created the environment in which South Korea's progressives' interpretation of Korean history, with its relentlessly negative view of the role of the United States in it, could take root and become the political mainstream. The result was that South Korea, rather than fearing abandonment by the United States, began to implement a policy of disengagement from the United States. The seeds of alliance discord had been sown and had taken deep root.

It was in this context that important shifts in the U.S. strategic posture toward Northeast Asia in general, and toward North Korea in particular, began to take place, especially since 11 September 2001. With its focus on the global war on terror and the prevention of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) backed by a doctrine of preemption, the United States with its new strategic initiative approached the issue of Northeast Asian regional security from a perspective fundamentally different from that formulated during the Cold War. The new strategic initiative had a most direct effect on U.S. policy toward North Korea when North Korea was designated a member of the “axis of evil” alongside Iran and Iraq. Such a designation and the aggressive effort on the part of the United States to curtail North Korea's nuclear ambitions and to contain possible proliferation of its WMD came into direct conflict with South Korea's policy of engaging North Korea.

Indeed, the new U.S. strategy of preemption and prevention vis-à-vis the North Korean regime and South Korea's engagement of the North are two policies that could not be more incompatible. As a result of the fundamental shifts in the policy orientations of the two allies, the roles played by the United States and South Korea vis-à-vis North Korea have been undergoing change. In the past, it was South Korea that was always looking for the slightest provocation from the North to reinforce its defenses and to up

the ante in the North-South competition. Thus the United States not only defended South Korea from a possible North Korean attack but also exercised a moderating influence on South Korea's otherwise belligerent attitude toward the North. It was almost as if the United States was what was keeping the two Koreas from attacking each other. The United States was the arbiter between the South and the North, the stabilizer, and the guarantor of peace on the Korean peninsula.

Now, however, the roles have completely reversed. Increasingly, it is South Korea that plays the role of the "good cop" while the United States is the "bad cop." South Korea is now the one that is pursuing an engagement policy with the North, trying to maintain a peaceful relationship with it while the United States pursues a policy of pressuring the North with sanctions and barely disguised threats of military intervention. This, however, is an untenable situation for the United States, one that only confirms the progressives' suspicion that it is the United States that is standing in the way of reconciliation between the two Koreas.

In a way, the wisdom and practicality of each policy can and should be debated and weighed independently of each other. For one thing, as policies, both have severe limitations. There are serious questions as to whether the policies would be able to meet their stated goals even if they were pursued without interference. It is not at all clear that the hard-line policy of the United States toward North Korea based on the new strategic doctrine would succeed in forcing compliance from North Korea even without South Korea's constant "interference." Nor is it at all clear that South Korea's engagement policy would succeed in taming North Korean behavior and bring it into the community of "normal states" even without U.S. unilateralism and hawkishness derailing it. However, when two flawed policies are pursued by the two allies simultaneously, serious problems are bound to arise. As things currently stand, the strains in the alliance are exacerbated by the two flawed policies whose failure thus far to reach their objectives has been attributed to the interference or recalcitrance on the part of the alliance partner.

The problem here seems to be that the United States and South Korea differ not only on what the right strategy or policy would be to coax North Korea out of its current isolation and convince it to give up WMD but also on how to read North Korea's ultimate intentions. South Korea's policies are premised on the assumption that North Korea wants to come out of its isolation and join the ranks of normal nations and is only looking for a face-saving strategy to do so. As far as South Korea is concerned, the United States is refusing to grant the North Koreans a graceful exit from their present predicament. For its part, the United States thinks that North Korea is using the engagement policy of South Korea only to receive aid, given by the South rather indiscriminately, while it earns precious time to strengthen its state apparatuses to sustain the anachronistic regime. As far as the United States is concerned, North

Korea seeks regime survival without fundamental changes while South Korea's engagement policy is enabling it to do precisely that.

Many have thus argued that the deterioration of the alliance is as much the responsibility of the United States as it is of South Korea. Some have even argued that the United States is unable to overcome its Cold War mentality, a tendency reinforced by the new strategic initiative that is undermining the alliance (Armstrong 2005). However, it is worth pondering whether the adoption and application by the United States of its new strategic initiative would have, in and of itself, adversely affected the alliance without the changes that have taken place in South Korean domestic politics.

In fact, it can be argued that, had it not been for such changes, the new strategic initiatives of the United States would have served as the perfect alternative rationale for the continuation of the alliance that the two allies had been searching for since the end of the Cold War. With the continued designation of North Korea as a major threat to the security of both the United States and South Korea, even in the face of a fundamentally different strategic context, the alliance would have received a new grounding, a new lease on life. As it turns out, shifts in South Korea's domestic politics not only undermined the traditional rationale for the U.S.–South Korea alliance but have been causing tensions with the U.S. new strategic initiative as well.

## **VI. Democratization and Politicization of the Alliance**

Thus, what we have are two flawed and diametrically opposed policies adopted by the two allies. Moreover, both policies face a strong domestic opposition at home. In the past, in the United States, concern about the Korean peninsula was largely the domain of area specialists and those whose job it was to formulate policies regarding this particular region of the world. However, the North Korean issue is no longer viewed as a regional issue but as part of the proliferation of WMD issue and the global war on terror, a perspective that gives the issue a much broader appeal. Thus, the North Korean nuclear issue and the U.S.–South Korean alliance is the subject of major national policy debates, including ones between potential presidential candidates of the Republican and Democratic parties in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Little knowledge of the strategic dynamics of the region, let alone its history and culture, is necessary to pronounce on the issues surrounding the peninsula, given that North Korea is now understood almost uniquely as a rogue state or a member of the axis of evil in U.S. global war against terrorism.

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6. See the exchange between Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.), as reported by Lobe (2006); also see "McCain Criticizes Bill Clinton on North Korea," Associated Press, 10 October 2006, [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15210254](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15210254).

In South Korea during the years of authoritarian and conservative governments, the policy toward North Korea was not the subject of public debate. South Korea had only one policy, a hard-line one, which the anticommunist governments adopted. However, with democratization and the coming of age of a new generation of South Koreans, things began to change. Because the progressives who have come to power in the wake of democratization define their ideology and policies as being against the policies of the authoritarian regimes, anticommunism and hawkish policies toward North Korea that were maintained by the conservative governments of the past have become the target of the progressives' political attacks.

As a result, policies toward North Korea became a part of the ideological struggle between the conservatives and the progressives of South Korea, the former wanting to continue the long-standing policy of containing, isolating, and ultimately destroying the North Korean communist regime and the latter wanting to engage North Korea to turn it into a normal member of the international community. The conservatives criticize the progressive government's engagement policy as hopelessly naive, one that is aiding and abetting a totalitarian regime that is bringing indescribable suffering to its people, including mass starvation and wretched human rights abuses in massive concentration camps for political prisoners. The progressives, for their part, blame the conservatives for prolonging the anachronistic Cold War on the peninsula under which the so-called military-industrial complex of South Korea thrived and prospered for the past half century as it rendered the division permanent.

The alliance is thus hopelessly politicized. The governments of the two countries could not be further apart in terms of ideological orientation. The combination of domestic politics and the discordant alliance relationship has resulted in the politicization of the alliance to an extent unimaginable and unseen in the days prior to democratization in South Korea and the adoption of the new strategic doctrine by the United States.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The fundamental political and ideological changes that have taken place during the past decade in South Korea, the greatest beneficiary of the alliance, are the root causes of the difficulties currently afflicting the alliance. Herein lie the irony as well as the difficulty. As the Cold War rationale for the U.S. military presence on the peninsula unraveled, a radically different understanding of the U.S. role began to take its place. South Korea's current ruling coalition hails from the school of leftist nationalism that emphasizes independence and self-determination as the ultimate goal. These progressives regard the United States as the imperialist power that has been meddling in Korean affairs from the "beginning." For them the dissolution of the alliance; pulling

out the U.S. forces from Korea; and full engagement with, and embrace of, North Korea are the only ways to right the wrongs of modern Korean history.

The problem with this seemingly tidy nationalist policy and its recommendations is that it presupposes the acquiescence and acceptance of Korean national self-determination on the part of China, Japan, Russia, and the United States—the great powers surrounding the two Koreas. However, when one looks at the past, present, and future of the great powers' configuration in Northeast Asia, a policy of national self-determination, particularly one that is premised on the weakening or dissolution of the U.S.-Korea alliance, is seriously flawed. Rising China, increasingly nationalistic Japan, and a Russia bent on regaining lost influence in the politics of the region all point to the importance of the U.S.-Korea alliance despite all the changes that have taken place in this region since the end of the Cold War.

Clearly, a new strategic initiative of the United States that is diametrically opposed in its aims and orientation to South Korea's policy of engagement toward North Korea has negatively impacted the alliance. Even if there had been no changes in the U.S. strategic posture, however, the alliance would still have been in trouble. It is only against the background of the fundamental shifts in South Korea's political and ideological orientation that such factors as the new U.S. strategic initiative and South Korea's engagement policy could have exacerbated the tensions in the alliance, as indeed they have. The cause of the current tensions in the U.S.–South Korea alliance is the weakening of the alliance's normative base, that is, South Korea's "domestic support for activation of the alliance commitment," which is "the true test of alliance resiliency" (Cha and Hahm 2001, 68).

The future of the alliance depends much on whether the progressives in South Korea continue to hold onto power in the future.<sup>7</sup> Much would seem to ride on the outcome of the December 2007 presidential elections in South Korea. To be sure, the history of engaging North Korea and disengaging from the United States pursued by the past two consecutive progressive governments has taught, if nothing else, the difficulty, if not folly, of trying to pursue an inter-Korean policy without U.S. support. The recalcitrance on the part of North Korea, despite South Korea's tolerant attitude toward its antics and the South's continued munificence, has also done much to dampen the enthusiasm of those who advocated unconditional engagement. Thus, it is unlikely that South Korea's next administration, even a progressive one, will continue the naively nationalistic policy vis-à-vis North Korea, on the one hand, and the United

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7. As for the United States, ever since North Korea detonated its first nuclear device, the Democrats have expressed as much hard-line thinking toward North Korea as the Republicans. See, for example, Carter and Perry (2006).



States, on the other. At the same time, among the wider public, especially the younger generation, it will take some time before the progressive view of history is replaced by a more pragmatic and realist one in which the role of the U.S.–South Korea alliance is once again given the importance it is due.

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