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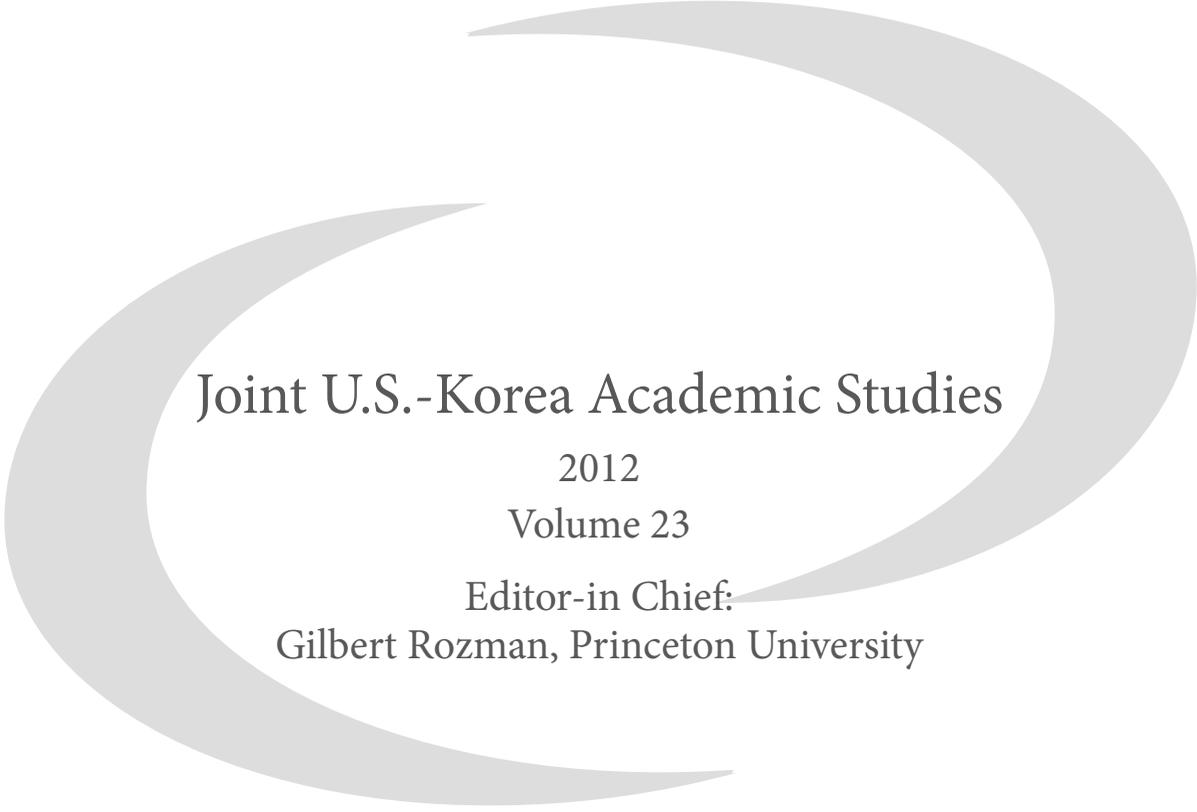
JOINT U.S.-KOREA ACADEMIC STUDIES

ASIA AT A TIPPING POINT:
KOREA, THE RISE OF CHINA,
AND THE IMPACT OF
LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF:
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Vol. 23

 **KEI** KOREA
ECONOMIC
INSTITUTE
한미경제연구소



Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies

2012

Volume 23

Editor-in Chief:

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Political Change in 2010-2012 and
Regional Cooperation Centered
on the Korean Peninsula

Leadership Changes and South Korea's China Policy

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Changes in political leadership are often associated with readjustments or reversals of policy, the impact of which can be both wide-ranging in scope and long-lasting in duration. Foreign policy, which had long belonged to the realm of sovereign decisions by the kings and their trusted servants in traditional times, has of late fallen into the domain of intense bargaining and compromises between the state and the society in the era of informatized popular democracy.¹ Political leaders are, of course, still empowered to make authoritative decisions but their boundary of discretion is now significantly constrained by the obligations to reflect and accommodate the interests and, increasingly, sentiments of the people who vote for them.

This article tackles the following question: Are leadership changes associated with oscillations in South Korea's China policy? Three issues seem particularly important: (1) how South Korean elite perceptions of China have been evolving over the years; (2) given that South Korea is now a fully-operating democracy where political elites have to accommodate popular sentiments and demands to a certain extent, how South Korean people's views of China have changed over time; and (3) whether South Korea's China policy has actually oscillated in tandem with the fluctuations in South Korean perceptions and views of China. The article deals with each of these issues in that order and concludes with some observations on future challenges.

SOUTH KOREAN ELITE PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA

For much of the history of the Republic of Korea, Seoul's foreign policy and external strategy has revolved around Washington as the U.S. has been its patron and principal protector against communist threat and against North Korea in particular.² Until the 1970s, China and South Korea were antagonistic to each other at worst and indifferent at best. For China, North Korea was a close ally while, for South Korea, Taiwan was a principal partner. Naturally, during this earlier period, South Korean elite perceptions of China as North Korea's ally and protector were generally negative, if not entirely hostile.

Cold War Sentiments

During Syngman Rhee's rule in the 1950s, Cold War sentiments dominated foreign policy in South Korea. U.S.-China relations, Sino-South Korean relations and inter-Korean relations were all so antagonistic that virtually no room was available for Seoul's direct dealing with Beijing, not to mention a rapprochement between the two. The present danger of North Korean aggression at the height of the Cold War was such that South Korea's foreign policy focus revolved mainly around the task of maintaining and consolidating the military alliance with the U.S.

The rise of Park Chung-hee in 1961 did not change the South Korean elite's perception of China as an antagonistic communist nation. Economic development became a top priority and, for that reason, sustaining solid security ties with the United States was deemed a prerequisite. The only official encounter between South Korea and

China took place at Panmunjom where armistice meetings were held intermittently. Throughout the 1960s, Cold War sentiments continued to dominate foreign policy in Seoul, thereby precluding possibilities for Sino-South Korean rapprochement.³

Drastic changes occurred in the international strategic environment during the early 1970s. China's accession to the United Nations in 1971, Nixon's blitzkrieg visit to China, and the subsequent rapprochement in 1972 between China, on the one hand, and the United States and Japan, on the other, came as a shock to South Korean elites. Mindful of China's potential influence over North Korea, Seoul came to think strategically about improving relations with Beijing. As early as 1971, South Korea's Foreign Minister, Kim Yong-Sik, commented that "[I]t is the policy of my government to approach the question of improving relations with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China with flexibility and sincerity."⁴ According to a 1972 survey, as many as 38% of the National Assembly members were already in support of diplomatic normalization with Communist China.⁵

President Park's view of China shifted from antagonism and concern to interest and sense of utility. In 1972, Park instructed his Foreign Ministry to expand contact with Chinese diplomats overseas. For that purpose, five embassies and one consulate general (Washington, Tokyo, London, Paris, Ottawa and Hong Kong) were designated as the venues for such contact.⁶ Park's strategic thinking was encapsulated in his June 23, 1973 announcement, which abandoned the long-held Hallstein Principle and opened the door to socialist nations like China and the Soviet Union. South Korean media repeated the tune that Seoul should remain alert security-wise but keep its diplomatic options open as far as China was concerned.⁷ Of course, the detente atmosphere in inter-Korean relations was also a factor in favor of such shifting views of China in South Korea.

The fall of Saigon in 1975 and complex post-Mao succession politics in Beijing slowed down the momentum for rapprochement between South Korea and China. While details of Park's strategic thinking toward China still remain veiled, many of his overtures toward China were concentrated in the last phase of his rule (1977-79), concomitant to Seoul's increasingly bumpy relationship with Washington. The failed nuclear weapons program in the midst of the "Carter chill," by which all U.S. ground combat forces were to be withdrawn from South Korea in four to five years from 1977, must have pushed Park for an alternative window for security assurance—i.e., rapprochement with communist foes.⁸ It was not a coincidence that Kim Kyung-won, special assistant to the president on international security affairs, remarked in November 1978 that South Korea hoped to improve relations with China.⁹

China as a New Window of Opportunity

During his tenure as president, Chun Doo-hwan displayed strong interest in improving ties with China, as well as with the Soviet Union. During his state visit to Washington in 1981, Chun commented, "[I]f the People's Republic of China is a friend of the United States, I think I can extend the logic and say a friend of a friend is less of a threat to us."¹⁰ Recent documentation also demonstrates that the Chun administration skillfully utilized the 1983 hijacking incident and the 1985

Kunsan torpedo boat incident in improving ties with China.¹¹ In retrospect, however, Chun appears to have been more committed to consolidating Seoul's alliance relationship with Washington. Given that his rise to power was facilitated by the military coup d'état and bloody suppression of the Kwangju Uprising, America's formal endorsement must have been indispensable in securing the support and legitimacy for his regime.¹² Chun's view of China proved to be largely economic in pursuit of diversification of South Korea's export markets and investment destinations.

Roh Tae-woo was different from Chun, however. Roh was popularly elected and, therefore, not as much constrained by consideration of how his legitimacy was perceived by the United States. President Roh actively searched for alternative frameworks of South Korea's external relations. For one, he sought to utilize China in efforts to diversify South Korea's trading partners so as to reduce excessive dependence on the United States and Japan. For another, more importantly, Roh also wished to shed Seoul's role as Washington's loyal subordinate by actively seeking rapprochement with Moscow and Beijing.¹³

Unlike Chun, from the outset, Roh had a strategic agenda regarding South Korea's diplomacy toward the socialist bloc and China in particular. Roh described his vision as follows: "[A] new beginning [is here], an era of hope, which will see Korea, once a peripheral nation in East Asia, take a central position in the international community." He went even further by saying that "[W]e will broaden the channel of international cooperation with the continental countries with which we have thus far had no exchanges...Such a northward diplomacy should also lead us to reunification."¹⁴

Roh's northern diplomacy was, to a certain extent, seen as an independent effort to reduce excessive dependence on the United States. In December 1988, Park Dong-jin, Korea's ambassador to Washington, characterized American views of *nordpolitik* at the time as South Korea's "unilateral drive"—i.e., lacking sufficient consultation with its key ally.¹⁵ South Korea's response to the Tiananmen massacre in June 1989 was not synchronized with the tough measures adopted by the United States, Europe, and Japan. South Korea remained silent on the bloody military suppression and willing to resume business with China. Whereas the number of business delegations to China from the United States and Japan was reduced by more than 50%, those from South Korea marked a 70% increase over 1988.¹⁶

What then prompted South Korea to view China as a new window of opportunity? Strategically speaking, as noted earlier, the desire to reduce dependence, both economic and strategic, on the United States played a crucial role, while South Korea's growing national pride—an inclination to pursue a status on a par with her newly acquired capabilities—was also a factor. As an American analyst aptly put it: "Leaders in Seoul display a new appreciation that security means more than perpetuating the U.S. connection...[I]t still remains vital, but so are Seoul's new-found diplomatic levers."¹⁷

There was also the Japan factor. Regarding Japan, there existed a huge perceptual gap between the United States and South Korea. During the 1990s, South Korea viewed Japan as most threatening while America maintained much more favorable

perceptions of Japan.¹⁸ Though briefly and implicitly, there were some shared perceptions between China and South Korea of the latent threat that Japan might pose for the region. In fact, one reason for Beijing's decision to normalize relations with Seoul in 1992 was allegedly to lay the groundwork for an anti-Japan coalition.¹⁹

Much of Kim Young-sam's reasoning with regard to the role of China, or regarding South Korea's external strategy, remains unknown. Kim appears to have viewed China as a new window of opportunity, though largely unspecified. At a press briefing on his state visit to China on March 29, 1994, Hwang Byung-tae, South Korea's ambassador to China, remarked that "South Korea-China cooperation over the issue of North Korea's nuclear program should go beyond the level of simply notifying Beijing what has already been decided between Seoul and Washington.... South Korea's diplomacy should break out of its heavy reliance exclusively on the United States."²⁰ Although the remarks were drastic by the standards of the time, neither did President Kim endorse the remarks, nor was the ambassador sacked. (He remained in his post until 1996). Expectations for China as a strategic actor in the Korean game were indeed growing among South Korean elites.

In retrospect, it appears that up to Kim Young-sam's rule, South Korea's China policy had a linear upward trajectory from the points of antagonism and indifference to those of rapprochement and normalization filled with high expectations for economic and even some strategic cooperation. As the domestic political scenes became more complicated during the late 1990s, South Korea's China policy also took on an ideological—i.e., zero-sum—dimension.

The Rise of the Progressives, 1998-2007

The election of Kim Dae-jung as president in 1997 marked a new era in South Korean politics as it was the first progressive government to come to power. Kim pursued a dual-track strategy—the "Sunshine Policy" toward North Korea and an engagement policy toward China—and neither made the United States happy. The Sunshine Policy, engaging and assisting North Korea without requiring any *quid pro quo*, was closely connected with the engagement policy toward China in the sense that the Kim administration found it necessary to elicit support—or at least no objection—from China in order to accomplish reunification. Since South Korea was structurally tied to the United States through the alliance framework, it was thought, the spread of the "China threat" thesis would only constrain the range of Seoul's options.²¹

The rise of the progressive government coincided with the empowerment of public opinion in South Korean politics. During the period of concern, highly favorable and hopeful views of China emerged, marking a stark contrast with the plummeting popularity of America in South Korea.²² While the Kim administration possessed some threads of distinct strategic thinking, it did not have a China focus *per se*. Instead of viewing China as an alternative or counterweight to the U.S.-centered diplomacy, Kim's strategic thought revolved more closely around inter-Korean cooperation (*minjok gongjo*) and reunification, for which China was considered one of many variables.²³ Furthermore, South Korea at the time needed America's support for economic recovery from the

severe financial crisis and, therefore, Seoul's engagement toward China was yet neither so proactive nor pursued at the expense of South Korea-U.S. relations.

Toward the end of Kim Dae-jung's term, South Korea-U.S. relations plummeted to a record low in the wake of candle-lit anti-American demonstrations ignited by the tragic incident where two schoolgirls had been run over by a U.S. army vehicle. Among other things, the rise of fierce anti-American sentiments contributed significantly to the election of Roh Moo-hyun in December 2002. Worth noting is the fact that, up to that point, anti-Americanism was not directly connected to pro-China sentiments in South Korean politics. That is to say, zero-sum views linking Korea-China relations with Korea-American relations were not yet so popular.

The failed impeachment in 2003 led to a landslide victory for Roh's party in the National Assembly elections of April 2004. The subsequent massive inflow of younger politicians into the political arena introduced a drastic—both generational and orientational—change to the elite strata in South Korea as over two-thirds (68%) of the National Assembly members in the incumbent Uri Party and nearly half (43%) of those in the Grand National Party were younger first-timers. Many had different world outlooks. According to a *Dong-A Ilbo* survey of 138 newcomers to the National Assembly in 2004, 55% viewed China as a more important foreign policy target of South Korea than the United States.²⁴ More importantly, the spread of such opinion surveys gradually linked the elites' perceptions of the United States with those of China, unintentionally and unnecessarily popularizing dichotomous zero-sum views.

The Roh administration inherited its predecessor's Sunshine Policy toward North Korea. Vis-a-vis the United States and Japan, it insisted on "diplomacy with self-esteem," different interests were to be duly noted rather than concealed. In coping with the second nuclear crisis since 2002, while the Bush Administration took South Korea out of the driver's seat, Seoul was, nevertheless, singing peace and stability to the tune of Beijing in the backseat in efforts to prevent Washington from adopting non-peaceful measures against Pyongyang.²⁵ This naturally led to the situation where China emerged as an influential player and mediator in the North Korean conundrum. The heated debates among South Korean policy elites on the size, location, and timing of dispatching South Korean forces to Iraq in early 2004 were also indicative of the state of affairs in the Korea-U.S. alliance at the time.

It is often suggested that the Roh administration's catch phrase of "independence" or "self-reliance" meant a policy stance closer to China than to the United States. Despite painstaking compromises found in *Pyonghwa wa bonyong eul wihan dongbuka* (Peace and Prosperity for Northeast Asia) compiled and published in 2004 by the National Security Council (NSC), the Roh administration was generally seen as tilting toward China.²⁶ In an interview with this author, Lee Jong-seok, who directed the National Security Council for the first three years of the Roh administration, remarked:

President Roh took the task of keeping a balance between Washington and Beijing seriously, and this was often interpreted - wrongly - as taking a pro-China stance....As the administration stressed multilateral cooperation in the region, bilateral ties with the U.S. weakened to a certain extent, thereby further augmenting the image of the administration as tilting toward China.²⁷

In the summer of 2004, China dealt a heavy blow to the Roh administration. With much attention given to China's "Northeast Project" (*Dongbei gongcheng*)—efforts to incorporate much of Korea's ancient history into China's "local history"—many South Koreans became deeply concerned with the rise of an "assertive" China. Those who had had high hopes and expectations for China were disillusioned.²⁸ As Table 2 demonstrates, the impact of the history controversy was such that South Korean perceptions of China made an about-face in 2004.

The South Korean elite also changed its views of China. According to a 2005 survey conducted with 187 members of the National Assembly, 68% chose the United States as South Korea's most important foreign policy target.²⁹ Compared to the 2004 survey conducted with 138 assemblymen, which found 55% of the respondents chose China, the impact of the history controversy was readily discernible. Interestingly, one of the books that was then known to be Roh's favorites depicted the United States as a constant, not a variable, in South Korea's security equations and stressed the need to maintain Seoul's "independent" status vis-à-vis China.³⁰ The sudden surge of interest in a Free Trade Agreement with the United States (KORUS FTA) in 2005 is notable in the sense that Seoul was reawakened to America's strategic value.

The essence of the Roh administration's strategic thinking is found in Seoul's negotiations since 2003 with Washington on the issue of "strategic flexibility" (i.e., on what terms the U.S. forces can be deployed in and out of South Korea to cope with regional contingencies). While it initially appeared that South Korea was paying much attention to Chinese views and concerns, it, in fact, sought hard to avoid the intricate situation where it could be inadvertently sucked into an unwanted regional conflict—say, over the Taiwan Strait—thereby damaging its economic interests in China.³¹

Overall, in stark contrast with the earlier expectations, South Korea's strategic relationship with China of this period did not improve to the extent of compensating for the serious cracks in the Seoul-Washington alliance relationship. As a matter of fact, toward the end of Roh's term, South Korean perceptions of China continued to worsen (see Table 2) and, in tandem with South Korea's growing economic and diplomatic dependence on China, a sort of "China fear" began to emerge.³²

The Conservatives Strike Back

The election of Lee Myung-bak as president in December 2007 and the victory of the Grand National Party in the April 2008 National Assembly elections brought about drastic changes in South Korean politics. The principle of "ABR" (anything

but Roh Moo-hyun) was implemented virtually across the board.³³ To the extent the Roh administration was held accountable for the weakened ties with the U.S., the incoming administration vowed to restore and consolidate the alliance. Given the prevailing zero-sum views in South Korea, this inevitably meant weakened ties with China or, at least, a perception as such.

Table 1 illustrates the self-categorized ideological orientations of the National Assembly members in the last ten years. Among the members of the 18th Assembly (the bottom row), the share of conservatives was much higher (61%) than after the previous two elections. According to a 2008 survey conducted among 220 members newly elected to the 18th National Assembly, 137 members (59.6%) chose the United States as the most important country, while the comparable figure for China was 81 (35.2%).³⁴ Compared to the aforementioned 2004 survey which found that 55% of the Assembly members surveyed chose China, the orientational difference of the key elite was clearly identifiable.

	Conservative	Progressive	Others
2002 (16th)	19%	20%	69%
2004 (17th)	20%	45%	35%
2008 (18th)	61%	33%	6%

Sources: *Dong-A Ilbo*, April 14, 2008; and <http://ask.nate.com/qna/view.html?n=8148689> (accessed on January 5, 2012).

Assessing the Lee administration's China policy from 2008 through early 2012 is a rather complicated task since, at least on the surface and in rhetoric, it paid much attention to sustaining a good relationship. Generally speaking, however, its China policy has not really lived up to its rhetoric and announced policy goals. We may employ the following three criteria to substantiate this specific assessment.

First, while South Korea and China established a "strategic cooperative partnership" (*zhanlue hezuo huoban guanxi*) in May 2008 in efforts to expand the domain of Sino-South Korean cooperation from merely bilateral to regional and even to global issues, little evidence is thus far available to indicate that the two nations have indeed achieved genuine cooperation on urgent regional problems such as the North Korean nuclear issue, not to mention global ones. Particularly after the Cheonan sinking and the Yeonpyeong shelling in 2010, serious doubts have been cast with regard to the real meaning of "strategic cooperation" between the two nations.³⁵

Second, Chinese assessments of South Korea-China relations are such that they are "generally healthy but carry some 'dark currents' that can affect the relationship at any time" (*zongti lianghao de tongshi ye shibushi you anliu yongxian*).³⁶ Alternatively, South Korea's relations with China are also viewed as "hot in economics, warm in diplomacy, but cool in security terms." The ever-increasing trade statistics are starkly contrasted with China's stance on the sinking and shelling incidents in 2010. China's unequivocal defense of North Korea even

in the case of the first-ever attack by North Korea on South Korean land territory since 1953, which led to tragic civilian casualties, tells us a lot about the current state of affairs in South Korea-China relations.

Third, the Lee administration's "alliance first" policy (consolidating the strategic alliance with the U.S. and accommodating America's requests for military support in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere) was seen by the Chinese as de-prioritizing China and rejecting the "pro-China" policy of the progressive governments before it. One crucial point needs to be highlighted at this juncture. It refers to the unduly heightened expectations that China had of South Korea's China policy under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. Chinese analysts referred to U.S.-South Korean relations in the Roh administration as an "alignment" (*lianmeng*) instead of an "alliance" (*tongmeng*), thereby denoting a less military-related and looser organization. Yet, during Lee's rule, Chinese analysts reflected on their mistakes of over-interpreting and over-generalizing the policies of the two progressive governments.³⁷ At least from China's perspective, changes in political leadership mattered in terms of South Korea's policy toward China.

UPCOMING CHALLENGES: POLICY OSCILLATIONS AND DEMOCRATIC TRAPS

Theoretically speaking, democracy is said to be well functioning when government policy is able to reflect and accommodate the general public's views and needs. Although the nature of foreign policy is different from many other types of government policies, public opinion is generally understood to wield increasing levels of influence over South Korea's foreign-policy making. On the basis of thirty-four nationwide opinion surveys, Table 2 compares South Korean views of China with those of the United States for the period 1997-2012.

The public opinion data in Table 2 offer two interesting observations. First, with the year of 2004 as a watershed, South Korean views of China made an about face. For the period from 1997 to early 2004, nine (90%) out of the ten surveys found that South Koreans had more favorable views of China than of the United States. During 2004-2011, however, only four (16.7%) out of the twenty-four surveys found that South Koreans' perceptions of China were more favorable than those of the United States. The impact of the Koguryo controversy (from 2004) on views of China appears to be stronger and more durable than previously assumed. Apparently, South Korean perceptions have shifted to a zero-sum view in the sense that a decline (or increase) in negative views of China has been correlated with an increase (or decline) in positive views of the United States.

Second, more importantly, it appears that the respective government's China policy in the last ten years or so roughly corresponded with South Korean public opinion of China. During the period of two progressive governments, South Korean perceptions of China were far more favorable than those of the United States, and for the period of the conservative government under Lee, South Koreans viewed the United States more positively than China. One problem with this interpretation, however, concerns

Year	Chose China	Chose U.S.
1997 ^{1*}	56	31
1999 ^{2*}	33	22
2000 ^{3***}	45	43
2000 ^{4***}	53	8
2001 ^{5**}	29	30
2002 ^{6**}	41	30
2002 ^{7**}	50	36
2002 ^{8**}	55	37
2003 ^{9***}	48	33
2004 ^{10***}	48	38
2004 ^{11*}	24	53
2005 ^{12**}	39	54
2005 ^{13**}	38	37
2005 ^{14**}	65	51
2005 ^{15**}	15	38
2005 ^{16**}	11	46
2005 ^{17***}	29	55
2006 ^{18**}	12	50
2006 ^{19**}	56	51
2006 ^{20**}	24	47
2006 ^{21**}	57	58
2007 ^{22**}	32	35
2007 ^{32**}	10	53
2007 ^{23*}	20	79
2008 ^{24***}	52	30
2008 ^{25**}	40	49
2008 ^{26*}	18	52
2008 ^{32**}	8	61
2008 ^{27*}	23	50
2008 ^{28***}	15	45
2009 ^{29***}	32	51
2009 ^{32**}	6	68
2010 ^{30**}	6	71

2010 ^{31**}	4	71
2011 ^{32**}	5	69
2011 ^{33**}	33	78
2012 ^{34**}	12	35

Notes: *Question: With which country should South Korea maintain close relations? ** Question: Toward which country do you feel more favorable? ***Question: Which country should South Koreans regard as more important?

Sources:¹The Sejong Institute, 1997 *Seyon Report* (Seoul: Dongseo Research, October 1997), pp. 11-13; ²*Dong-A Ilbo*, January 1, 1999; ³*Hanguk Ilbo*, June 9, 2000; ⁴*Dong-A Ilbo*, December 5, 2000; ⁵*Dong-A Ilbo*, December 25, 2001; ⁶*Sisa Journal*, March 2002; ⁷*Wolgan Chosun*, July 2002; ⁸*Chosun Ilbo*, December 22, 2002; ⁹*Joong-Ang Ilbo*, February 12, 2003; ¹⁰*Dong-A Ilbo*, May 4, 2004; ¹¹*Global View 2004* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 2004), p. 19; ¹²*Chosun Ilbo*, January 1, 2005; ¹³*Hankyoreh sinmun*, March 17, 2005; ¹⁴*Hanguk Ilbo*, June 10, 2005; ¹⁵*Kookmin Ilbo*, December 9, 2005; ¹⁶*Joong-Ang Ilbo*, December 22, 2005; ¹⁷*Dong-A Ilbo*, November 7, 2005; ¹⁸*Joong-Ang Ilbo*, May 18, 2006; ¹⁹*Hanguk Ilbo*, August 7, 2006; ²⁰*Munwha Ilbo*, September 16, 2006; ²¹*Joong-Ang Ilbo*, December 23, 2006; ²²*EAI Opinion Briefing*, No. 9-2 (March 6, 2007); ²³*Christian Science Monitor*, August 13, 2007; ²⁴*Dong-A Ilbo*, April 1, 2008; ²⁵*EAI Opinion Briefing*, No. 25-1 (April 2, 2008); ²⁶*Kookmin Ilbo*, August 15, 2008; ²⁷*Dong-A Ilbo*, August 15, 2008; ²⁸*Kyunghyang sinmun*, August 15, 2008; ²⁹*SBS Sisa toron* (RealMeter: February 21, 2009); ³⁰*Chosun Ilbo*, August 12, 2010; ³¹*2010 tongil euisik josa balpyo* (Survey Report on the Consciousness of Unification) (Seoul: Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, Seoul National University, September 7, 2010), p. 90; ³²*2011 tongil euisik josa balpyo* (Survey Report on the Consciousness of Unification) (Seoul: Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, Seoul National University, September 21, 2011), p. 58; ³³*2011 gugkbang e daehan gukmin euisik josa* (Survey Report on the People's Consciousness Regarding National Defense) (Seoul: Korean Institute for national Defense, November 2011); ³⁴*Dong-A Ilbo*, January 6, 2012.

how to assess the Roh administration's China policy for the period of 2005-2007. If South Korea's agreement to the strategic flexibility of American forces in 2006 and the signing of the KORUS FTA in 2007 are interpreted as indicators of changes in Roh's China policy, the Roh government can also be said to have been more reflective of public opinions in its foreign-policy making.³⁸

If the findings noted above are a useful guide, which party should dominate the National Assembly elections in April and who should be elected as the new president in December this year are the most important issues of all. As for April, uncertainties loom large for at least two reasons. First, South Korean voters do not seem to have high levels of trust in incumbent politicians. According to a recent nationwide survey, respondents replied that as many as 61% of the incumbent members of the National Assembly need to be replaced by new faces. Ongoing nominations of candidates also seem to reflect such sentiments. Second, compared to four years ago when the popularity rating for the opposition party was a mere 9.6% as opposed to the governing Grand National Party's 54%, the current ratings as of March 2, 2012, were 31.8 versus 33.7%.³⁹ Predicting the outcome is difficult.

Predicting the outcome of the presidential election is equally, if not more, daunting. Unlike 2007, the upcoming presidential election is likely to be neck-and-neck given the growing discontent with the incumbent party. Notable at this point is the steady increase in the number of people who identify themselves as "progressives," which rose from 26.6% in 2006 to 28.9% in 2010 and 32.3% in 2011.⁴⁰ At the time of this writing, it is still not clear who will be the candidates from the governing and

opposition parties, or whether there will be a significant third-party candidate. Whoever the candidates may be, the most crucial issue at hand is whether they will be able to break the fixed image of their party's China policy. Will they be able to dispel the zero-sum cast between China policy and U.S. policy? Given that China policy is occupying an increasingly important place in South Korea's external strategy, how the candidates will address this issue—if the theme of foreign policy should become a key agenda at all for the presidential election—remains to be seen.

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20. *Chosun Ilbo*, March 31, 1994.

21. Chung-in Moon and Taehwan Kim, "South Korea's International Relations: Challenges to Developmental Realism," in Samuel S. Kim, ed., *The International Relations of Northeast Asia* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), p. 271.
22. See Jae Ho Chung, "Dragon in the Eyes of South Korea: Analyzing Korean Perceptions of China," in Jonathan Pollack, ed., *Korea: The East Asian Pivot* (Newport: Naval War College Press, 2005), pp. 258-59. Also see David I. Steinberg, ed., *Korean Attitudes toward the United States: Changing Dynamics* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2005).
23. For certain differences in policy preferences between Seoul and Washington during this period, see Catharine Dalpino and Bates Gill, eds., *Brookings Northeast Asia Survey 2000-01* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2001), p. 31.
24. *Dong-A Ilbo*, April 19, 2004.
25. Norman Levin, *Do the Ties Still Bind? The U.S.-ROK Security Relationship After 9/11* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2004).
26. National Security Council, *Pyonghwa wa bonyong eul wihan dongbuka* (Seoul: NSC, February 2004).
27. Interview in Palo Alto on March 20, 2009.
28. Jae Ho Chung, "China's 'Soft' Clash with South Korea: The History War and Beyond." *Asian Survey*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (July-August, 2009), pp. 468-83.
29. *Dong-A Ilbo*, April 13, 2005.
30. Bae Ki-chan, *Korea – dasi saengjon eui giroe soda* (Seoul: Wisdom House, 2005), pp. 426-28.
31. Jae Ho Chung, "Frictions over the Korea-America Alliance," in Jae Ho Chung, ed., *Jungguk eul gominhada – Hanjung gwangye eui dilemma wa haebop* (Seoul: Samsung Economic Research Institute, 2011), p. 254.
32. Perceptions were mutual as Chinese views of South Korea also worsened during these years. See Wang Xiaoling, *Zhongguoren xinmu zhongde Hanguoren xingxiang* (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2009), pp. 374, 378, 438.
33. The presidential transition team was allegedly unwilling to talk with the staff of the outgoing administration, and it even contemplated abolishing the Ministry of Reunification, then viewed as the bastion of progressives in support of the Sunshine Policy.
34. *Dong-A Ilbo*, April 14, 2008.
35. For a detailed analysis of this issue, see Jae Ho Chung, "China's Evolving Place in South Korea's Security Matrix," in Byung-Kwan Kim, Gi-Wook Shin and David Straub, eds., *Beyond North Korea: Future Challenges to South Korea's Security* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press, 2011), pp. 137-53.
36. Zhan Xiaohong, *Donglin mianmianquan* (Jinan: Shandong daxue chubanshe, 2010), p. 43.
37. Jae Ho Chung, "Frictions over the Korea-America Alliance," pp. 255, 258; and Zhou Hui, "Chaoyue chuantong: Meihan qingli dazhao xinxing zhanlue tongmeng guanxi," *Xiandai junshi*, No. 5 (2010), p. 16.
38. China has been highly sensitive to the issue of strategic flexibility due to its ramifications for the so-called "Taiwan contingency." Beijing was unhappy with Seoul's signing of an FTA with Washington since China had wished to do it with South Korea first. See Li Jun, "Zhuhuan meijun zhanlue linghuoxing de neihan ji yingxiang," *Xiandai guoji guanxi*, No. 4 (2006), p. 52.
39. *Chosun Ilbo*, March 5, 2012.
40. *Maeil Gyungje*, January 2, 2012.



ASIA AT A TIPPING POINT: KOREA, THE RISE OF CHINA, AND THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

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