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FUNDAMENTAL REALISM KOREAN ASSESSMENTS OF U.S. POWER

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Despite the global recession, Koreans will continue to have positive views of U.S. leadership, the resiliency of American hard and soft power, and an appreciation of the critical role the United States plays in the region, given the rise of China. Koreans will hold a nuanced understanding of some of the domestic constraints on U.S. foreign policy, which does not reduce their anxiety about perceived negative trends in U.S. behavior. Although there has been a degree of hedging in ROK thinking about the United States and China influenced by past South Korean liberal administrations, current and future thinking is likely to remain strongly aligned with the United States. According to policy elites, China's behavior in the aftermath of the *Cheonan* sinking, the North Korean enriched uranium revelations, and the Yeonpyeong Island shelling has shifted the core strategic calculations of South Koreans, who now view a fundamental conflict of interest with China regarding North Korea and potential unification even as Seoul continues to seek economic opportunities in China. This recent turn of events will only increase ROK appreciation of the alliance with the United States as the cornerstone of its strategy.

Key Concepts

U.S. Power

- South Koreans will continue to hold a fundamentally realist appreciation of U.S. power. They will still view the most proximate indicator of U.S. military capabilities—U.S. troops in Korea—as the greatest guarantor of national security.
- South Koreans will retain core fears of U.S. abandonment even when alliance relations are good. Even conservative, pro-alliance stalwarts harbor unspoken fears that the United States might abandon the alliance with South Korea (for example, enter into a separate Korean War peace treaty or withdraw troops) in order to secure the denuclearization of North Korea.¹
- Though never stated in polling data or in editorial pages explicitly, these South Korean views of the United States are informed by a fundamental attribution error—that is, South Koreans tend to interpret “good” actions by the United States in alliance policy as “situational” (in other words, the Americans were “nice” because the situation dictated such behavior) and exagger-

The author thanks D. Alex Bartlett, Soo Kook Kim, and Nick Anderson for research assistance.

1. For example, see “Are Seoul and Washington Being Completely Frank?” *Chosun Ilbo*, October 23, 2009, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2009/10/23/2009102300843.html.



ate “bad” actions in U.S. alliance policy as “dispositional” (as being representative of the true intentions or disposition of the United States). This sort of attribution error contributes to the constant fears of abandonment even if relations with the United States are in a good patch.

U.S. Values

- South Koreans will continue to admire U.S. values represented in its political system as a model to emulate.
- South Koreans will have a nuanced and empathetic understanding of the constraints that domestic priorities place on foreign policy. This will not make Koreans any less uneasy about trends they perceive in the United States, but there is a baseline of understanding.

U.S. Economy

- South Koreans still view, by a wide margin, the United States as the leading economic power despite the global recession. They will carefully watch the U.S. economic recovery and draw direct links between U.S. stimulus packages and the fate of Korea’s exports.

Future Geostrategy

- South Koreans will continue to hold a hardened “realist” view of the balance of power in Asia. Despite rhetoric and policies that seek to create institutional rules and interdependent economic ties, there will continue to be a core understanding or concern that relations among the great powers (such as between the United States and China) play a critical role in determining Korea’s fate.

- South Koreans, like many other players in the international system, will fuel the catch-22 regarding demands on U.S. hard power—the single most important determinant of U.S. standing is whether it is perceived to continue to provide public and private goods to the target country. Currently, that is still the case. The irony is that as U.S. power is perceived to decline in the future this will only increase, not decrease, demands on U.S. power.
- South Korea’s geostrategic tilt toward the United States after the *Cheonan* sinking and the Yeonpyeong shelling still leaves unanswered the question of how much the long-term economic interaction with China might affect ROK strategic outlooks. More study of this topic is still required.

Methodology

The arguments in this report are supported by interviews in the field with policy elites (in the Blue House, Foreign Ministry, Unification Ministry, Defense Ministry), think tank specialists, journalists, and scholars. Additional information was collected from polling data (Korean and international) and primary source materials including editorials from major Korean newspapers, conference papers, and journal articles. Relevant polls have been gathered from Pew Research, Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University, *JoongAng Daily*, Institute for National Security Strategy (INSS in Korea), National Strategy Institute (NSI), Korea Institute for Defense Analysis (KIDA), and the ASAN Institute for Policy Studies (AIPS in Korea). Editorials are chiefly gathered from three major newspapers in Korea: *Chosun Ilbo*, *JoongAng Daily*, and *Dong-A Ilbo*.

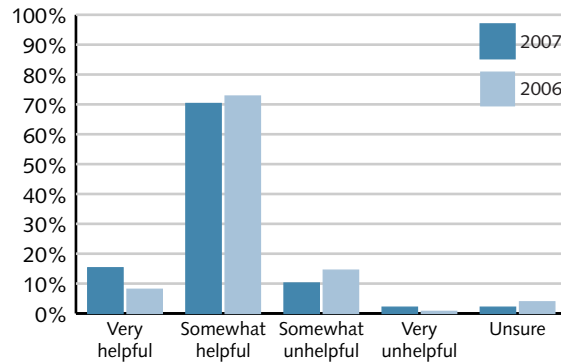
Views of Traditional Sources of American Power

Military Power

Future Korean views of American power will remain grounded in fundamentally “defensive realist” thinking. This means a full appreciation for U.S. hard-power capabilities and for the role those capabilities play in Korean national security; but it also means occasional objections to the use of U.S. hard power, particularly if it is unilateralist or revisionist in nature. Koreans generally will adhere closely to administrations that hold status quo views of the world and seek to use U.S. hard power only to maintain the peaceful status quo rather than to overturn it (for example, opposition to Iraq invasion). As figure 1 shows, the overwhelming majority of Koreans (80–90 percent) will continue to hold the core belief that U.S. military power is critical to national security, even as they might oppose certain military policies of U.S. administrations. A telling sign is that even among those who have unfavorable views of the United States, a strong majority (72 percent) still perceives the continuation of the U.S.-ROK alliance as necessary.² Likely spurred by the fact that few (25 percent) think the South can deter the North without the United States, and even

2. Chaibong Hahm et al., “AIPS Opinion Survey 2010: Report on Korean Attitudes toward the United States” (presentation by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Seoul, 2010), http://www.asaninst.org/sys_gita/down_eng.php?folder=Ym9hcmRfZmlsZXM=&file_name=ZmlsZTNfMTEwLnBkZg==&real_file=MTAxOV9wcmVzZW50YXRpb25fc2xpZGVfYXNhbW5wZGY%3D

Figure 1. Koreans' Views on the U.S.-Korea Alliance and Security, 2006 and 2007



Source: Dohk Goh Soon et al., "National Survey of Defense," Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA), December 2007.

fewer (23 percent) believe that South Korea alone would be victorious in an inter-Korean war, the vast majority (87 percent) of South Koreans see the U.S.-ROK alliance as a necessity in the future.³

Policy elites in Korea understand that the United States, as a global power, has a broad agenda and therefore must have military capabilities that span the world. But even as realists, they view limits to how much the United States can accomplish with unilateral military power. Figures 2 and 3 show that Koreans can simultaneously favor relations with the United States (93 percent), strongly oppose the invasion of Iraq (85 percent), and view the United States as an international pariah (81 percent).

Koreans will remain concerned about future unilateral uses of U.S. power. They overwhelmingly expect the United States to seek international approval and multilateralism when it uses military force. In the past, close to two-thirds of South Koreans (65 percent) expected the U.S. president to seek international approval for any use of force.⁴ Despite the multidecade alliance, only a moderate majority (60.1 percent) agree that the United States and South Korea have common interests, and of those a mere 5.8 percent strongly agree.⁵ Where policy elites in Seoul confide that they worry about such use most in the future is vis-à-vis Iran. Koreans generally oppose the use of military force as an instrument for counterproliferation in Iran, presumably fearing the use of force on the Korean Peninsula under the similar conditions. Previous polls support this view; they show that only 44 percent support military action against a developing nuclear program.⁶

Bottom line: Despite these caveats, South Koreans will continue to view a stable U.S.-Korea strategic alliance as critical to their future over the next ten years, with China a distant second (see figure 4, which depicts a survey taken in Korea in 2007, before the sinking of the *Cheonan*).⁷

3. Ibid.

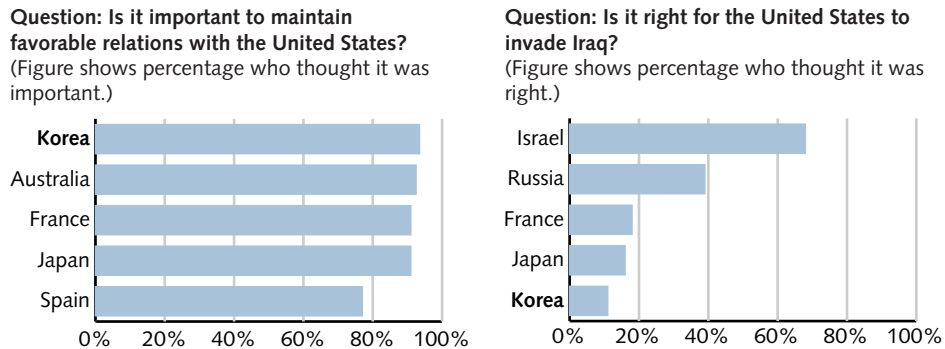
4. J. M. Horowitz, "Obama Popular in Japan, China and South Korea: But Only Modest Improvements in U.S. Image," Pew Global Attitudes Project, November 12, 2009, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1409/obama-asia-trip-popular-japan-china-south-korea>.

5. Hahm et al., "AIPS Opinion Survey 2010." »

6. A. Kohut, "Restoring America's Reputation in the World," Pew Global Attitudes Project, March 4, 2010, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1512/restoring-americas-reputation-globally-gains-may-be-fragile>

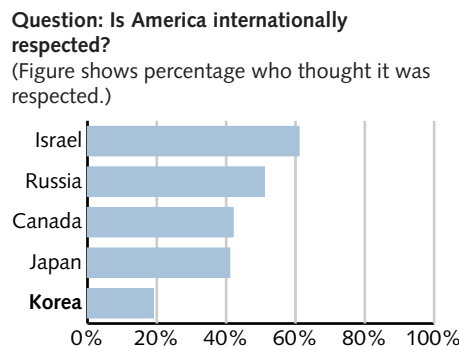
7. S. Dokgo et al. "National Survey of Defense," Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA), December 2007.

Figure 2. Koreans' Views (Compared with Other Selected Countries) on Relations with the United States, 2007



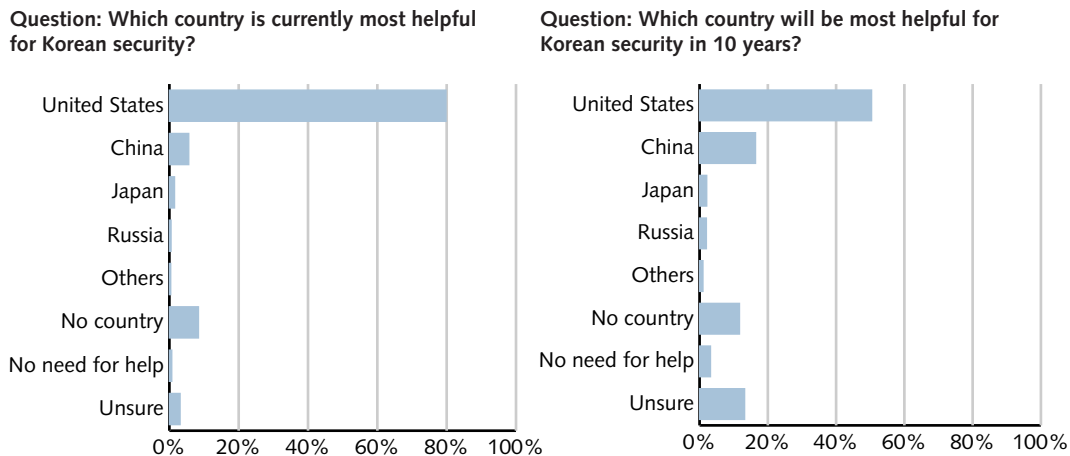
Source: Dohk Goh Soon et al., "National Survey of Defense," Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA), December 2007.

Figure 3. Koreans' Views (Compared with Other Selected Countries) on Respect for the United States, 2004



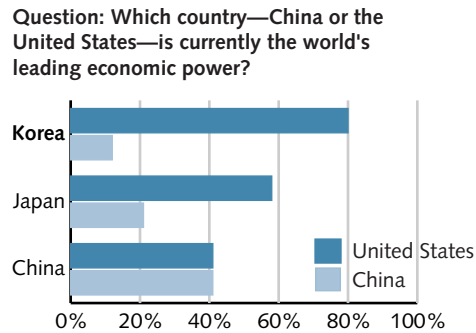
Source: "Public Perception of the United States in 10 Countries," *JoongAng Daily*, October 14, 2004.

Figure 4. Koreans' Views on Most Important Security Guarantor Currently and in 2017



Source: Dohk Goh Soon et al., "National Survey of Defense," Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA), December 2007.

Figure 5. Respondents Views in Selected Countries about World's Leading Economic Power, 2009



Source: J. M. Horowitz, "Obama Popular in Japan, China and South Korea: But Only Modest Improvements in U.S. Image," Pew Global Attitudes Project, November 12, 2009.

Note: Respondents were asked to choose among the United States, China, Japan, and the European Union.

Economic Capabilities

Among major Asian economies, South Korea will consistently continue to name the United States as the world's leading economic power. There are, and will be, constant concerns about the periodic rise of protectionist sentiment in the United States and about being tied too closely to the U.S. economy. But Koreans still broadly want the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) passed, even as it ties the two economies even closer together.

The U.S. economic model and capabilities have long been emulated and admired by Koreans. The United States is still seen as the leading economy by South Koreans (80 percent) and by a significant percentage more than by Japanese or Chinese (see figure 5).⁸

Hypothetically, there are two variables that could change the perception of U.S. economic power: the global recession and rising protectionist sentiment in the United States. Regarding the global recession, the current situation has not led Koreans toward dumping the U.S. model. Compared with other Asian countries, Korea was actually the country that held the most positive expectations for the longevity of the U.S. model. Korea registered a decrease in the percentage of people who viewed U.S. economic influence as growing more negative between 2008 and 2009. China, Japan, and India scored higher relative to Korea (table 1).⁹

Regarding protectionist sentiment, interviews with policy elites, editorial content, and public opinion polls suggest that Koreans will remain deeply concerned about a tide of protectionism in the United States, even with the successful negotiation of the KORUS FTA in 2010. Policy elites' concerns stem not just from parochial interests. They draw a direct link between the U.S. position on free trade and broader U.S. leadership in Asia.

Koreans will always have a better understanding than most in the region of the constraints on U.S. policy because of a rather nuanced and sophisticated view of how democracies operate. But this does not alleviate anxieties. In this regard, there is no overestimating the importance of the

8. Horowitz, "Obama Popular in Japan, China and South Korea,"

9. "Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S. Image Around the World," Pew Global Attitudes Project, July 23, 2009, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1289/global-attitudes-survey-2009-obama-lifts-america-image>.

Table 1. Respondents in Selected Countries Who Viewed U.S. Economic Influence as Negative, 2009

Country	2008	2009	Change
	%	%	
Canada	—	78	—
China	18	27	+9
India	25	23	-2
Indonesia	37	27	-10
Japan	63	67	+4
Pakistan	30	40	+10
South Korea	41	37	-4

Source: "Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S. Image around the World," Pew Global Attitudes Project, July 23, 2009.

Note: Table shows the percentage of the total sample saying the U.S. economic influence is negative. The question was asked only of those who said the U.S. economy has a great deal or a fair amount of influence.

KORUS FTA as a major bellwether of future U.S. leadership in Asia in the eyes of Koreans (and arguably other Asian trading nations). Korean policy elites in Washington and in Seoul view the ratification of the KORUS FTA not just as a trade issue but as an alliance strengthener in the face of North Korean threats and a rising China.

Korean views of U.S. technology and products will remain strong on the whole, and research has found that neither the beef controversy nor the unresolved disagreement over U.S. automobiles has shaken that basic perception.

Bottom line: The Washington model (as opposed to the Beijing model) will continue to be favored among Koreans. The U.S. market will still be seen as an opportunity to continue export-led growth and deepen relations, but this enthusiasm will be tempered by concern that deeper integration with the United States also exposes Korea to future U.S. recessions. This translates into a marginal degree of self-reflection on the need to diversify the South Korean economy away from excessive reliance on exports.

Ideas and Values

The United States and Korea will forever be tied together as two prominent liberal democracies in Asia. It is therefore unsurprising that Koreans in general have positive views of U.S. ideational power. Koreans view themselves as a model example of the U.S. Cold War experiment—emergence from a war-torn society into a global economic power with an open political system. This is a powerful lesson that has been replicated in only a few other cases in modern international relations. This will continue to inform admiration for U.S. ideas and culture, as well as politics, even if troubling trends surface.

According to a Pew poll in 2007, sizable majorities in South Korea continue to express positive views of the U.S. approach to democracy, and more than one-third of Koreans have a favorable

Table 2. Views of Respondents in Selected Countries about U.S. Intellectual Exports, 2007

Country	Positive views of:		
	U.S. movies, music, and television	U.S. science and technology	Spread of U.S. ideas
	%	%	%
Pakistan	4	36	4
India	23	64	29
China	42	80	38
Bangladesh	14	81	25
Japan	70	81	42
Malaysia	54	83	16
Indonesia	50	84	11
Korea	49	85	38

Source: “Global Unease with Major World Powers—Rising Environmental Concern in 47-Nation Survey,” Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 27, 2007.

image of the spread of U.S. ideas in Korea.¹⁰ Particularly, they have positive impressions of American education and science and technology. Among South Koreans, 49 percent have a positive view on American movies and music, and 85 percent on U.S. science and technology (see table 2).¹¹

Koreans have unusual admiration for the perceived ability of U.S. politicians to engage in civil debate and to reach out across party lines. A March 2010 editorial in *Dong-A Ilbo* said: “The [U.S.] Republicans are the minority in both the Senate and House, but did not resort to physical resistance at the vote or street rallies in collaboration with external forces. . . . Why Korean politicians have no intent to show the same image remains a mystery.”¹² The editorials reveal that the Korean perception of U.S. politics has been influenced by President Barack Obama’s efforts to strike a bipartisan tone, but they also reflect the vulgar level of partisan rancor in the Korean polity.

Assessments of American Power

Government

The popular view is that the key variable in determining future ROK government views of the United States is the ideological leaning of the party in power in Seoul. This is only partially correct. The algorithm must also include the issue of North Korea. Contrary to conventional wisdom, neither liberal nor conservative ROK governments have major disagreements with U.S.

10. “Global Unease with Major World Powers—Rising Environmental Concern in 47-Nation Survey,” Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 27, 2007, <http://pewglobal.org/2007/06/27/global-unease-with-major-world-powers/>.

11. *Ibid.*

12. “Mature Democratic Behavior,” *Dong-A Ilbo*, March 23, 2010, <http://english.donga.com/srv/service.php3?bicode=080000&biid=2010032336328>.

administrations on domestic policy, economic policy, and the global agenda. There is substantial political overlap of the political center in Korea with that in the United States. Thus, a liberal ROK government (Roh Moo-hyun) will send troops to Iraq, just as a conservative one (Lee Myung-bak) sent troops to Afghanistan.

Assessments do vary on North Korea, however, where policy disagreements over the level of engagement can affect perceptions and the overall tone of relations. The Roh Moo-hyun National Security Council once commented in private that despite the ideological differences with President George W. Bush, Seoul and Washington agreed on almost every issue except North Korea. This dynamic is likely to repeat itself under future liberal governments in Seoul.

Elites

Korean policy elites generally divide along two lines. One group comprises the older, Korean War generation of elites (now in their 50s–70s), many of whom have done graduate study in the United States, taught at the elite Korean universities, and served in the Korean government. This group of opinion leaders will continue to have generally positive views of U.S. power and presence. They value the alliance as a normative good and see America as key to Korea’s and the region’s stability. There is a younger generation (in their 30s–40s) of policy elite, largely the post–Korean War generation, also educated at top universities in the United States and in Korea, who appreciate the role of the United States in Korea’s development and security but hold slightly more critical views of the United States. This latter group and future generations that will follow it are very important in that they hold views unbiased by the “U.S. savior role” of the Korean War. They will be extremely critical of the United States if it acts unilaterally, but they will also see benefits to the alliance and to the continued U.S. presence in Asia.

Population

The standard interpretation is that popular views on the United States break down along generational lines. The Korean War generation tends to hold more conservative, pro-Western views. The 3-8-6 generation (30-something in the 1990s, college-educated in the 1980s, and born in the 1960s) is more critical of the United States given that their formative experiences centered on the struggle for democracy and perceived U.S. complicity in the Kwangju massacre. But the most interesting recent trend in popular views in Korea centers on the 20-somethings. This is a non-ideological, materialist, apolitical generation by Korean standards. And yet, the young generation in their 20s has recently become more pro-American than both the generation of people in their 30s, and the general perception as a whole, as shown in table 3. What is interesting is that members of this age group travel as much to China as they do to the United States for language study and recreation.

Defense, Intelligence, Diplomats

One of the more troubling trends to watch for is political “redirection” of the ministries when power changes hands in Seoul. During the past decade we have seen some Korean ministries under the direction of new political leaderships shift their attitudes toward the United States. Specifically, the period of liberal rule in Korea coincided with a marked shift in the agenda vis-à-vis North Korea. Defense and intelligence officials played down the threat from the North. ROK

**Table 3. Korean Respondents' Answers to the 2008 Survey Question:
"How positive or negative an influence do you think the United States has had on the
change of Korean society since its establishment?"**

Characteristics of respondents	Total sample	Very positive	Slightly positive	Slightly negative	Very negative	Do not know/ no response	Total
	No.	%	%	%	%	%	%
Total	724	26.9	53.8	14.0	3.2	2.0	100.0
Gender							
Male	358	34.4	50.1	12.3	2.3	0.8	100.0
Female	366	19.5	57.5	15.7	4.1	3.2	100.0
Age							
From 19 to 29	154	12.6	64.4	17.4	4.0	1.6	100.0
From 30 to 39	166	12.7	60.5	20.5	5.7	0.7	100.0
From 40 to 49	163	28.2	55.3	13.5	2.9	0.0	100.0
Over 50	241	44.8	41.5	7.8	1.2	4.6	100.0
Educational background							
Middle school or lower	78	32.1	50.8	7.7	2.0	7.3	100.0
High school	225	30.0	49.9	14.1	3.1	2.9	100.0
College or higher	421	24.2	56.5	15.2	3.5	0.6	100.0
Occupation							
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries	26	42.0	32.5	21.9	3.6	0.0	100.0
Self-employed	77	28.1	54.5	15.6	0.9	0.8	100.0
Blue collar	73	14.2	66.7	15.2	3.1	0.8	100.0
White collar	190	29.8	48.5	16.0	4.3	1.5	100.0
Full-time housewife	197	25.3	55.2	12.1	2.8	4.6	100.0
Student	93	14.7	66.8	13.1	5.4	0.0	100.0
Unemployed and other	68	46.4	40.8	9.4	0.9	2.6	100.0

Source: "Chosun Ilbo March 2008 Opinion Poll Commemorating 60th Anniversary of Korea," *Chosun Ilbo*, March 5, 2008; available in the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation database (P08-03).

intelligence officials confided that they were not allowed to cable that the Americans were unhappy with a particular ROK position because Seoul responded that the bureaucrats were "not doing their job" to convince Americans otherwise. Bilateral intelligence exchanges, which had been frequent, became much less fluid. The one ministry that tended to navigate a central path despite these political forces was the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The ministry that showed the widest variation was the Ministry of Unification, with the defense and intelligence ministries falling in between. In the future, this will be an important variable that can dramatically affect the level of bilateral cooperation.

Table 4. Broad Views of the United States and the Republic of Korea toward Each Other

	U.S. liberal government	U.S. conservative government
ROK liberal government	(I) positive	(II) negative
ROK conservative government	(III) negative	(IV) positive

Source: Author's concept.

Business

The business sector generally retains favorable views of the United States. Members of this sector support free trade (although there are concerns about “green protectionism” in Congress) and foreign direct investment; however, the key variable that the business sector watches with regard to the United States is the security alliance and U.S. commitment. How the United States is viewed in terms of its level of security commitment to Asia is a key benchmark for market confidence and acts as the offset to the famed “North Korea discount” (the undervaluation of ROK publicly traded companies).

Possible Causes of Dynamism

The key variables that affect volatility in views of the United States are North Korea policy, democratic maturation (in the ROK), and the perceived capacity to provide public and private goods (by the United States).

Table 4 generally encapsulates the views of the United States with regard to North Korea policy.

There are variations to the simple algorithm in table 4. For example, at the end of the George W. Bush administration, engagement policies coincided with those of a liberal Roh Moo-hyun government (which would make quadrant II positive). But the point is that Korean governments will continue to see North Korea policy as all consuming, which means that disagreements with the United States (for which North Korea policy is at best a policy distraction) will affect the overall tenor of relations.

Fundamental Attribution Error

This asymmetry in views of a critical issue for Koreans is exacerbated by basic cognition errors to which the United States must be attentive. Policy elites tend to assign dispositional qualities to any U.S. behavior that appears negative (for example, “bad” American behavior manifests the true U.S. disposition toward Korea). Conversely elites assign situational qualities to any positive U.S. behavior (for example, “good” U.S. behavior is not dispositional but is temporarily dictated by the situation). Thus, if the United States talks about future drawdowns of forces on the peninsula, Koreans will see this as dispositional rather than situational. On the contrary, strong U.S. statements of support for Korea will register as situational. These attribution errors are less prevalent when overall U.S.-ROK relations are good (as with the current Obama-Lee ties), but they will be exacerbated when relations are bad.

Scholars often argue that “unforeseen events” is a key variable that disrupts U.S.-ROK relations. The Highway 56 incident in 2002,¹³ the debate on the abolition of the National Security Law in 2004, the issue of moving a U.S. military base to Pyeongtaek, the KORUS FTA in 2006, and the controversy over importing U.S. beef in 2008 have been major sources of provocation.

But this is only partially correct. Two deeper dynamics are at work: democratic maturation and consolidation in Korea, and the U.S. capacity to provide public and private goods to Koreans.

First, although younger generations of Koreans have more discriminating and critical views of the United States, this is not anti-Americanism. This same generation has critical views of itself and of its own government. But what is emerging in Korea is a democratic maturation process by which political swings to the left or to the right become more moderate over time. We witnessed dynamic changes because of the political shift to the left under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, but the likelihood of future left-of-center governments taking similar pro-China positions or anti-U.S. ones is smaller. Similarly, future conservative governments will not adopt containment approaches to North Korea but will seek some form of conditional engagement. This does not guarantee against negative views of the United States, but it does reduce the variability described in the table 4.

Second, the longer-term core cause of dynamism in Korean views in the future will be the perceived U.S. capacity to provide public or private goods to Korea and the region. This project as well as another one undertaken by the American Political Science Association found that the single most important determinant of positive or negative views of the United States was the degree to which the United States is providing private or public goods. This might be interpreted in popular contexts as policy disagreement, but the fundamental question is deeper—that is, whether the United States is still seen as having the capacity to lead globally and in the region as demonstrated by continuing military commitments, commitments to free trade, and other specific agreements. Thus, a disagreement over beef imports—while creating “noise” in the relationship—is not a fundamental determinant of ROK views; at most it creates some marginal views about the quality of U.S. products. An inability to ratify the KORUS FTA or a perceived unfair agreement on missiles, by contrast, has serious implications for views of whether the alliance continues to provide private goods to Korea.

Emergence of New Rhetoric or Behavior Based on New Strategic Calculations

The two most significant changes in strategic calculations do not directly focus on the United States, but they are intimately tied to the alliance.

China

The first is the longer-term view of China. Policy elites at the highest levels in Seoul are now openly wary of China’s intentions. After Chinese students in Seoul started riots against Korean protestors during the Olympic torch procession before the 2008 Olympic Games, a former Blue House official called me (purposefully on an open line, it seems) to berate China’s audacity, saying “They cannot treat Asian neighbors like tributary states.” In the aftermath of the *Cheonan*,

13. Two Korean schoolchildren were killed by a U.S. military vehicle.

members of the national security team in Seoul claimed that “China has now shown its true face.” A senior Foreign Ministry official visiting Washington after the *Cheonan* sinking openly stated that Korea’s core strategic calculations on China have changed. What Koreans previously viewed as a positive-sum game with China when it came to North Korea is now seen in very cautious terms. Korean policy elites view China as obstructionist on North Korea and view unification as something opposed by Beijing. This trend has been accelerated by the *Cheonan*, but it has deeper roots going back to the 2008 torch relay, the Koguryo history controversy, the “garlic wars,” and the cumulative experience of doing business with China for 18 years since normalization in 1992. This trend, moreover, is not event specific and transitory. Many scholars in Korea see the current trend as a natural outgrowth of dealing with a large nondemocracy on Korea’s border. In other words, dissimilar political values are a critical driver of future China-ROK relations.

Unification

The second new trend regards unification. After one decade of not discussing unification and simply discounting it as too expensive and too dangerous (hence the policy justification for the “sunshine” or soft-landing engagement approach), Koreans are talking more openly about it. This trend grows out of concerns about Kim Jong-il’s severe health problems as well as a view that 20-plus years of negotiation have not led to the end of the nuclear and conventional military threats. The current government in Seoul has put resources behind this effort, basically utilizing the Unification Ministry’s budget (previously reserved for handouts to North Korea) to carry out a massive campaign aimed at preparing and socializing the Korean population and the world to the possibility of unification. Several major international forums were held in Seoul on unification in 2010 and more are to come. Lee Myung-bak raised the issue of a unification tax to prepare for this eventuality, which sets the stage for a national discussion on preparation for unification.

Both of these trends have obvious implications for the United States. We want to foster an environment that encourages Korean alignment but not one that causes Seoul to hesitate at becoming entrapped in a containment strategy against China, which would not be beneficial for U.S. or Asian interests. Regarding unification, the perception of U.S. support both politically and materially for unification, without appearing interventionist, will be hugely important for future views of the United States. Whether the United States has the economic capabilities to help is an important unanswered question, particularly given China’s currency reserves.

Future Direction of the Bilateral Relationship with the United States

A decent reservoir of goodwill exists in Korea, and the United States will be able to draw on it. Agreements during the past eight years, including the visa waiver, WEST,¹⁴ NATO-plus-three status, and the KORUS FTA have all been seen by Koreans as providing valued private goods to the relationship that puts the United States in good stead.

14. WEST refers to the “Work, English Study, and Travel” program, which grew out of a bilateral agreement signed by the governments of the United States and the ROK. It is part of the U.S. J-1 Exchange Visitor program that allows university students and recent graduates from Korea to combine language instruction, work experience, and travel in the United States for up to 18 months.

There are three issues over the next two to four years, however, that have the potential for creating fissures.

The first is the failure to ratify the KORUS FTA in both countries' legislatures. This would send several messages: (1) the United States is so bogged down in domestic politics that it cannot afford to invest in the long-term future of the alliance, (2) the U.S. position on trade in Asia is revisionist, and (3) the failure to ratify the KORUS FTA would send the message that U.S. leadership more broadly will be questioned once it turns toward protectionism.

The second and third issues are the bilateral missile agreement and the 1-2-3 nuclear agreement. In these cases, the source of tensions will not be whether Korea gets all that it desires in these negotiations (it won't). Instead, the key metric will be how these agreements play politically because some politicians (in the opposition) will be tempted to link these with sovereignty issues. This would again link to longer-term fundamental perceptions of whether the alliance continues to provide private goods to Seoul.

Three Most Important Decisions the United States Could Make to Improve Its Position in the Region

- **Free trade.** A positive and proactive position on free trade is critical to Korean and regional perceptions of sustained U.S. leadership in Asia in the face of a rising China. Koreans and Asians are watching very closely the fate of the KORUS FTA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. U.S. support for free trade is a public good in Asia.
- **Reassurance.** As tedious as it might be, the United States must continually “tend the garden” in terms of alliance relations, paying attention to details and to public face. Because of attribution errors that get exacerbated in difficult times, it becomes even more critical that Washington be aware of demonstrating commitment and reassurance. Pronounce U.S. commitments, restate them, and then reassure regarding these commitments.
- **Avoid unilateralism.** Whether this pertains to North Korea policy, Afghanistan, or China, Koreans respect the importance of U.S. consultation with allies and react badly to acts of unilateralism.