Security and Politics on the Korean Peninsula: Constantly Changing or Forever Constant?

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Introduction: A critical point in time?

"Forever constant" used to be the preferred adjective for describing Korean security.[1] For decades one could assert without fear of contradiction that, since the Panmunjom armistice that ended the Korean War in 1953, the Cold War standoff between the major powers in the region and the spectacular estrangement between the two Koreas meant that nothing had changed. Korea remained conspicuously untouched by the wave of change brought by the collapse of the Soviet Union, and often dismissed as hopelessly locked in the time warp of the Cold War.[2] Conventional wisdom and theories that described this stagnant situation remained unchallenged: the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK) was a reclusive, opaque and threatening regime; unification would come through victory of one side over the other (*songong t'ongil*); and the United States–Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance remained the bedrock of security on the peninsula. A bizarre form of stability grew out of this dangerous yet fundamentally unchanged situation, enduring until the 1990s.

Then in a space of five years a chain of unprecedented events took place. DPRK leader Kim Il-sung died in 1994, leaving a bankrupt economy to his son, Kim Jong-il, a mysterious and untested quantity. Famine conditions and a burgeoning ballistic missile capability raised concerns

that the forty-year old stalemate on the peninsula might end in either a North Korean implosion or explosion. The standoff over the North's nuclear program reached the brink of war in June 1994, only to be averted by the Agreed Framework **(see web link)** and a new path of U.S.–DPRK engagement. During this same period, the ROK peaked in its postwar development in 1997 with membership in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), only to plummet a year later in economic crisis and become an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout recipient. ROK president Kim Dae-jung, meanwhile, embarked on a new "sunshine" policy aimed at promoting engagement with the North and shedding the isolation and non-dialogue of the Cold War, which culminated in the historic and unprecedented summit between the two Korean leaders in Pyongyang in June 2000 **(see Addendum 1)**. Riding the momentum of this event, the U.S. promptly lifted some sanctions against the DPRK, and Japan sought to resume a long-suspended dialogue on normalization of relations **(see weblinks**). Jubilance and talk of peaceful unification, as well as murmurs about the "anachronistic" U.S.-ROK alliance, filled the air in Seoul. According to polls taken in the summer of 2000, 90 percent of South Koreans now have a positive image of North Korea and its leadership. An astounding 53 percent of this population – a group that traditionally identified their existence and legitimacy in opposition to the North Korean military threat – now dismiss the possibility of another DPRK invasion.[3]

What is one to make of these changes? Is Korea close to unification and an end to the Cold War stalemate? Are many of the conventional truisms about security and politics on the Korean peninsula suddenly on the verge of being overturned? Or does continuity still obtain on the peninsula? This essay begs these sorts of questions by highlighting the theme of constancy on the peninsula. While there has been some change, a great deal has remained the same; moreover, where significant change has taken place on the peninsula, the nature of it has often been misunderstood or overstated in the public debate. I make this argument by debunking three "myths" that have emerged in recent reassessments of conventional thinking on security and politics. These myths relate to the nature of the North Korean threat, the unification issue, and

the future of the U.S.–ROK alliance.

Overview of Events: Security and the North Korean Threat

"The bad has only gotten worse" typifies the thinking on the evolution of the North Korean threat. During the Cold War, the threat was that of another attempt by the North to overtake the peninsula by conventional ground force invasion.[4] In the post-Cold War era, it is argued, this threat has been supplemented by potential ballistic missile and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threats. This augmentation of capabilities has occurred with no apparent amelioration of the DPRK's aggressive intentions and is shrouded behind an even darker veil of uncertainty regarding the unpredictability and potential irrationality of the Kim Jong-il regime.

This is a credible assessment.At the same time, though, it appears inconsistent with debates that rage in Washington, Tokyo and Seoul over whether to engage or contain North Korea.[5] That such a vigorous debate exists reveals not consensus but the *absence* of agreement on the nature of the DPRK threat. In actuality, the DPRK threat is substantively different today than it was during the Cold War.

TABLE 1 - The Military Balance

TROOPS	**South Korea**	**North Korea**
Army	560,000	1,000,000
Navy[a]	67,000	60,000
Air Force	63,000	110,000
TOTAL	690,000	1,170,000
Corps (Army)	11	20
Divisions (Army)	50	6[b]
Brigades (Army)[c]	18	113
Tanks	2250	3800
Armored Vehicles	2300	2300
Field Artillery[d]	5200	12,000

Helicopters	580	see air force
Surface Combatants (Navy)	170	430
Support vessels (Navy)	20	47 [e]
Submarine/submersibles (Navy)	10	9 [f]
Aircraft (Navy)	60	-
Fighters/special aircraft (Air Force)	560	850
Support aircraft (Air Force)	220	84 [g]
Reserves	3,040,000 [h]	7,450,000 [i]

[a] Marine corps included
[b] One missile division included
[c] Mobile and combat brigades such as infantry, mechanized infantry, tank, special warfare, patrol, marine, and assault brigades included; combat support brigades excluded
[d] Includes rockets, guided weapons, and MRLS
[e] Includes about 170 Surface Patrol Boat Forces
[f] Includes 40 *Sang-0*-class submersibles
[g] Includes North Korean helicopters operated by air force
[h] Includes eighth year reservists
[i] Includes Reserve Military Training Unit, Worker/Peasant Red Guards, Red Youth Guards and social security agents

Source: Ministry of National Defense, The Republic of Korea, *Defense White Paper, 1999,* p. 245.

If an adversary's threat is measured as an aggregate of intentions, military and economic capabilities, domestic-political stability, and support from allies, then the North Korean threat was indeed formidable during the Cold War.[6] The U.S. and ROK faced a well-trained DPRK conventional force; an economy by that by CIA estimates rivaled, if not surpassed, its southern counterpart in GNP per capita; and the support provided by the economic patronage and security guarantees of China and the Soviet Union. Following the Cold War, however, the "threat" defined in these terms has been greatly reduced. DPRK military training and readiness has been undercut sharply by fuel shortages and falling morale. Its economy is bankrupt, experiencing real negative growth for nine consecutive years, and its society faces chronic energy shortfalls and near-famine conditions. Most important, it has lost Soviet and Chinese patronage.

TABLE 2 - Major Economic Indices of North Korea (1990-1998)

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
GNP (100mn USD)	231	229	211	205	212	223	214	177	126
GNP per capita (USD)	1064	1038	943	904	923	957	910	741	573
Economic growth	-3.7%	-5.2%	-7.6%	-4.3%	-1.7%	-4.5%	-3.7%	-6.8%	-1.1%
Exports (100 mn USD)	19.6	10.1	10.2	10.2	8.4	7.4	7.3	9.1	5.6
Imports	27.6	17.1	16.4	16.2	12.7	13.1	12.5	12.7	8.8
Coal output (mn M/T)	33.1	31.1	29.2	27.1	25.4	23.7	21	20.6	18.6
Electric power (bn kwh)	27.7	26.3	24.7	22.1	23.1	23	21.3	19.3	17
Grain output (10000 tons)	481.2	442.7	426.8	388.4	412.5	345.1	369	348.9	388.6
Rice output (10000 tons)	193.2	164.1	153.1	131.7	150.2	121.1	134	150.3	146.1

Source: ROK Ministry of Unification, Korea Institute for National Unification, *Annual Report 2000: The Unification Environment and Relations Between South and North Korea* (2000), p. 72.

The upshot is that the traditional DPRK threat assessment has been rendered virtually obsolete. U.S. and ROK forces are more than capable of deterring and, if necessary, defending and rolling back a North Korean advance, essentially making North Korean contemplation of such an act suicidal.[7]

WMD Proliferation Concerns

Does this mean we can relax, leaving fears of North Korea only to Pentagon-related threat-inflaters?[8] On the contrary, threats still exist and renewed hostility is still possible. But the nature of the problem has changed in two areas: proliferation and bargaining leverage. Regarding the former, since the early 1980s the DPRK ballistic missile program has produced a range of missile systems, either deployed or tested, demonstrating progress beyond most

expectations. Despite its dire material constraints, the North accomplished this largely through reverse-engineering of SCUD-B missile technology acquired from the Soviet Union.[9]

TABLE 3 - Ballistic Missile and WMD Capabilities on the Korean Peninsula

Country	**Ballistic Missiles**	**Range (km) Payload (km)**	**Nuclear**	**Comments**
North Korea	SCUD-B	300 km 1000kg	Weapons-grade plutonium reprocessing capabilities.	Operational, in production
	SCUD-C	500 km 700 kg		Operational, in production
	Nodong-1	1000 km 700-1000 kg	2 LWRs (1994 Agreed Framework)	In development, tested
	Nodong-2	1500 km 770 kg		In development
	Taepodong-1	1500-2000 km 1000 kg		Tested 31 August 1998, Combined Nodong and SCUD
	Taepodong-2	3500-6000 km 1000 kg		In development
South Korea	Nike-Hercules-1	180 km 300 kg	Civilian nuclear energy	Operational, modified SAM
	Nike-Hercules-2	250 km 300 kg	Reprocessing capability	In development, modified SAM

Source: Compiled from Center for Nonproliferation Studies http://cns.miis.edu/cns/projects/eanp/pubs/chinanuc/bmsl.htm; http://cns.miis.edu/cns/projects/eanp/pubs/chinanuc/nstock.htm; Joseph Cirincione, "Assessing the Assessment: The 1999 National Intelligence Estimate of the Ballistic Missile Threat," *Nonproliferation Review* (Spring 2000); and William Carpenter and David Wiencek, eds., *Asian Security Handbook* (NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 67.

The August1998 test flight of the Taepodong-1 over Japan (albeit a failed 3-stage payload launch) demonstrated an unexpected leap in the North's intermediate-range ballistic missile technology. In defiance of Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) norms, North Korea has been the most active producer and provider of SCUD missiles and related technology to Iran, Syria, and Pakistan, and concerns abound regarding future proliferation of longer-range systems.[10] Mated with the missile program have been dedicated DPRK efforts at acquiring a nuclear weapons capability. Originating in an agreement on the peaceful uses of atomic energy with the Soviet Union dating from the 1960s that endowed the North with a basic understanding of

nuclear physics, engineering and reactor operations, Pyongyang's nuclear industry became capable of supporting a complete nuclear fuel cycle by the 1980s. An initial small nuclear research reactor was subsequently followed by an operational five-megawatt reactor and construction of fifty- and 200-megawatt reactors that presaged an annual reprocessed plutonium production capacity that could sustain in excess of ten nuclear weapons. While these activities remain frozen and are subject to dismantling as a result of the 1994 U.S.–DPRK Agreed Framework **(see web link)**, suspicions remain regarding the North's plutonium reprocessing history, alleged covert activities outside Yongbyon, and possible possession of crude nuclear devices.[11]

Theoretical Relevance: Deterrence and Coercive Bargaining Strategies

The second major change with regard to peninsular security has been subtle but very significant changes to the logic of deterrence. The most worrisome contingency is no longer all-out invasion, but limited acts of belligerence by the North for the purpose of coercive bargaining. By virtually every conceivable calculation of the relative military balance on the Korean Peninsula today, U.S.ROK defense capabilities overwhelm those of the DPRK, rendering nil the probability of a successful second DPRK offensive.

TABLE 4 - United States Military Forces in the ROK

FORCES	**Today**
Army, Marines	27,084
Navy	327
Air Force	8,719
TOTAL	**36,130**
EQUIPMENT	
Tanks	116
Other Armor	237

Artillery and MRLs	72
Fighters	90

Source: Ministry of National Defense, The Republic of Korea, *Defense White Paper, 1999,* p. 33.

Moreover, standing U.S. war plans (Operation plan 5027) promise that any DPRK attempt to replay June 1950 would be met not just with swift defense but a comprehensive and decisive counter-offensive aimed at extinguishing the North Korean regime.[12] Hence, U.S.–ROK deterrence and containment force postures and doctrine deal with the contingency of all-out invasion very well.What is less clear is how effective this strategy is in dealing with *limited uses of force* by the North to coerce better bargaining positions. Since the end of the Cold War, Pyongyang's modus operandi has been to undertake acts of belligerence that violate the peace and disrupt the status quo, usually highlighting some grievance the DPRK holds. Each individual action is severe enough to raise concerns that it might be the precursor to a larger conflict, but at the same time, the individual violent act *alone* does not warrant all-out retaliation by the U.S. and ROK. Washington and Seoul are thus manipulated into the awkward position of wanting to punish North Korea for its misbehavior, but also fearing an unnecessary and costly escalation to a larger conflict. The response that obtains is therefore to renegotiate a new status quo, coupled with a token verbal denouncement of or sanction against the initial act.

From Pyongyang's perspective, the objective of this strategy is not to win militarily, but rather to initiate a *coercive bargaining* process that eventuates in a new negotiation outcome better than the status quo *ex ante*. This is a dangerous and destabilizing strategy, but it is the sort of high-stakes game that Pyongyang adeptly plays. Two observations about such a strategy require emphasizing: first, basic containment postures designed to deter all-out invasion may not be as effective in discouraging the limited use of force, and; second, and most important, the resort to force under such a strategy is *rational.* Even if objective factors weigh wholly against military success, the incentive to undertake a belligerent act is still rational because of the anticipated benefits of renegotiating a new status quo more in line with one's interests.[13]

The naval altercation off the west coast of the peninsula in June 1999 offered an ominous precedent. Several North Korean patrol boats entered intotransgressed South Korean territorial waters, prompting the ROK Navy to ram the trespassers and leading to an exchange of fire that left twenty to thirty North Koreans dead. This constituted one of the largest losses of life in an altercation since the 1953 armistice, and was a clear demonstration of the ROK's superior naval combat capabilities and training. What grabbed the headlines were the military clash itself and subsequent criticism of the evidently futile engagement policies with the North. But few really stopped to ask why the North took such actions knowing full well it could not win in a naval altercation with the ROK. One could explain these actions as: 1) an underestimation of ROK naval capabilities and resolve, or; 2) plain irrationality. But the most likely explanation lay in a coercive bargaining rationale for hostility. In other words, dissatisfaction with the status quo made it rational for the North to instigate hostile acts even though the objective chance of prevailing was nil. A limited disruption of the status quo (even while incurring substantial losses) thereby enables the North to seek the renegotiation of a new status quo hopefully more in line with its own interests. In the west coast incident, this had to do with the validity of the Northern Limitation Line (NLL) maritime border between South and North Korea.[14] But in other circumstances, it could be several artillery shells or one chemically-armed short-range missile fired into the South (and if possible at a non-American target). The DPRK cannot win a confrontation, but this act could still be rational in the sense that it would not be severe enough to prompt all-out war but would cause enough chaos to raise incentives on the peninsula to renegotiate a new status quo possibly more favorable to DPRK interests. Again, such an act would not be based on a rationale of winning but one of avoiding further loss. Like the gambler who can't catch a break, the more desperate North Korea becomes, the more risk-acceptant it becomes, and the greater the danger of limited uses of force for coercive bargaining.

The upshot of this for American security interests is that the "threat" posed by North Korea is inherently more complex and problematic than it was during the Cold War. While continued deterrence of a traditional ground invasion is undoubtedly still needed, the more salient

question concerns what, in addition to baseline containment, is necessary to deal with these problems of proliferation and coercive bargaining. Current strategies of the U.S., ROK, and Japan emphasize engagement layered on top of containment and nonproliferation sanctions, while alternative policies include containment-plus-isolation (practiced during the Cold War) and containment-plus-coercion with regard to the proliferation threat.[15] Whichever one's preference, the point to be noted is that, contrary to popular perception, the June 2000 Korea summit's effect on this threat assessment, at least initially, has been minimal. The potential threats, hence the need to address them, remain, however positive the summit's dynamics and their soothing effects on South Korean public opinion. According to the logic laid out above, the true test of whether the new confidence is justified is not a function of warm toasts, embraces, and other such positive atmospherics but the extent to which material improvements in the North's situation give it more to lose in coercive bargaining attempts, thereby rendering the policy unattractive.

Overview of Events: Unification

The sight of Kim Jong-il and Kim Dae-jung embracing in Pyongyang was a cathartic event for Koreans, filling a void in the Korean psyche and national identity. Accompanying the display of raw emotion and joy at this event were, in no uncertain terms, Korean claims that reconciliation for their long-divided country was finally imminent. How close are we to Korea's holy grail?

Historical Controversies: The Consensus for Korean Unification

In the post-Cold War era, the spectrum of discussion about unification has ranged from "hard-landing" scenarios, in which the South absorbs an imploded DPRK (popular in the early 1990s), to the "soft-landing" scenario of a controlled process of phased integration.[16] Despite this range of views, there have been two tenets almost religiously accepted and common to all. First, unification must come through the independent efforts of Koreans, without interference or

obstruction from external powers. Implicit in this view is that the major powers are fundamentally opposed to unification and seek to keep Korea down. Second, the division of the country since 1945 is an historical aberration for this ethnically homogenous 3,000 year-old civilization, and hence must inevitably end.

The first of these tenets, which has been an underlying principle of unification agreed upon by the two Koreas dating back to the 1972 joint communique and re-stated in every subsequent meeting including the recent summit, requires analysis. The notion of unification through independence (*chajusong)* is in principle unassailable, but in practice highly unlikely. This is less a commentary on the innate ability of Koreans than it is the curse of geography. The peninsula's location in Northeast Asia and Korea's status as a small power surrounded by larger ones make Korea geostrategically critical to major power interests.[17] One need only look at the past century, during which all the major powers (the U.S., Japan, China, and Russia) have fought at least one major war over control of the peninsula. Thus, as long as states vie for power and influence in the region, Korea will suffer the fate of the "shrimp crushed between whales." Put another way, Korea is simply too important for unification not to engage the interests of all the major powers. If the peninsula were located at the North Pole, unification through independent means might be possible, but its location makes major power interests an inherent element of any changes on the peninsula.

The complementary argument to *chajusong* is that all the major powers oppose unification. An opinion often espoused by Koreans, this view argues that the intentions of the major powers are to prevent a reunited Korea from upsetting the regional power balance, and that, despite rhetoric to the contrary, their grand strategies are dedicated implicitly to opposing or preventing unification. Koreans are so indoctrinated in this view that it has become an unquestioned fact, for which any evidence to the contrary is dismissed as aberrant or simply ignored. This is a terribly overstated myth. The major powers, in particular the United States and Japan, do not oppose unification per se. What they prefer on the peninsula is the "known" status quo to the "unknown" non-status quo option. The primary objective of each major power

on the peninsula with regard to its own national security is to maintain stability. In spite of the militarization of the DMZ and the absence of a peace settlement, a strange form of stability has emerged since 1953 based on deterrence and the military stalemate. A suboptimal outcome, in the minds of all concerned with the peninsula, is still preferable to a change in the status quo that may lead in unpredictable and unpleasant directions.

In spite of these considerations, if the two Koreas were to begin a process of unification tomorrow, it would be wholly consistent with the interests of the U.S. and the other major powers to *support* this process without obstruction. This is because any actions to the contrary would undermine the other major objective of each major power with regard to unification: avoiding a united Korea aligned against it. Actively impeding or opposing a process once it got started would virtually ensure a united Korean state hostile to one's interests. The standard truism about major power opposition to unification therefore is too crude. While the impetus for changing the status quo is not likely to come from the major powers, Koreans can be assured that once they started the process themselves, the external powers would be obliged to support it. This would not be out of affinity, goodwill or loyalty (although these factors may be present), but because it is in their respective interests to do so.

The NIMT ("not in my time") Consensus

The second tenet of unification is that it is inevitable because division is aberrant. Ironically, though, the greatest ambivalence with regard to unification these days comes not from outside Korea but from within. Unification has always been the holy grail, but the enthusiasm for it has seen decided peaks and troughs over the past decade. At the initial end of the Cold War, the common view was that unification (whether through hard or soft landing) was only a matter of time given the collapse of the Soviet Union and the North's economic difficulties. The Kim Young Sam administration of the ROK in the early 1990s claimed that absorption of their Northern brethren was just around the corner. However, both the confidence and enthusiasm that typified South Korean attitudes at the time waned dramatically thereafter, for several

reasons. First, few expected the continued cohesiveness of the North Korean regime. In spite of its economic difficulties, the end of Soviet and Chinese patronage, a leadership transition, and a variety of other potentially destabilizing factors, the regime defied all expert expectations and survived, thereby ruling out the "unification by default" scenario.[18] Second, a better understanding of the German case deflated Korean expectations in two ways. The comparative indicators did not bode well for Korea. For example, in the early 1990s, when talk about absorption was at its height, ROK GNP per capita was only 25 percent that of West Germany; moreover, the gap between the East and West German economies was much smaller than that between the two Koreas. While Germany's unification cost (estimated between $500 billion and $1 trillion) occupied only some 10 percent of the national budget, a low-end figure of $500 billion for Korea's unification amounted to over ten times Seoul's national budget. In addition, while West Germany was geographically larger and four times more populous than its counterpart, the ROK is 25 percent smaller in area and only twice as populous as the North, which presaged a relatively higher burden in infrastructure and social overhead capital (SOC) costs. Recent studies found that the costs of reconnecting just the main railways up the coasts of the peninsula would total nearly $9 , and those for bringing North Korea's SOC facilities to 1990 levels in the South would exceed $6 billion.[19] Moreover, what South Koreans saw initially as ill-advised mistakes by the Germans on integration policy, especially the one-to-one currency union, were soon to be seen as unavoidable given the need to accommodate a newly enfranchised East German electorate – a problem that a newly-united democratic Korean government would also face. Finally, while earlier assessments by government-supported research institutes in the South judged unification costs to be manageable, more objective independent studies subsequently put the costs in excess of $1 trillion.[20] In good part, these new estimates corrected for the biases and unforeseen consequences in earlier studies.[21] The liquidity crisis that hit South Korea in 1997-98 brought into stark and sobering relief the high costs of such an exercise and essentially deflated any remaining buoyant expectations about unification.

The newfound ambivalence toward unification is manifested in several ways. Popular

attitudes have changed markedly. Pragmatic conditionalities have become an integral part of what was formerly a normative discourse on unification. While a clear majority of those polled before the financial crisis (1995) saw unification as a "must" for Korea, only 40 percent responded this way in 1999.[22] In part this is linked to generational change, as those who remember a unified Korea (albeit as part of the Japanese empire) die off. It is also linked to the North's famine-like conditions over the past few years, which only further magnify the anticipated costs of union. The result is that unification is no longer seen in the same "holy" terms. The discourse quickly turns to the added tax burden faced by Koreans and the vast pressures the Northerners will place on an already weak social safety net. A 1996 Sejong Institute poll found nearly 80 percent of South Koreans opposed to raising taxes to pay for unification. Moreover, given both the North and South's economic problems, the percentage that view unification as an outright impossibility more than doubled between 1995 and 1999 (12 percent to 26 percent).[23] Hence, while it is still part of one's Korean identity to yearn for unification in normative terms, a pragmatic "NIMT" ("not in my time") consensus has emerged. As one observer noted, "[Unification] is a goal recited with an understood wink. While virtually everyone in South Korea vows allegiance to it, few people actually want it to happen very soon, if at all."[24]

This NIMT consensus is also apparent in government policy. A number of traits distinguish Seoul's "sunshine" or engagement policy with North Korea, including the persistence and consistency of the policy in spite of DPRK provocations, and the open-ended nature of engagement (encouraging all countries to engage with North Korea).[25] But what is most important in the context of this discussion is that it is the first Northern policy in South Korean history that does not explicitly enunciate a goal of unification, effectively taking it off the political agenda (in the South). The NIMT consensus was also reflected in the North-South summit. The language of the summit was rich with talk about national reconciliation and unification, but all of these references, while resonating normatively with Koreans, masked the mutually-understood reality that such an outcome was still a long way off. In fact, the two

unification formulas referred to in the joint declaration (the DPRK Confederal Republic of Koryo and ROK Commonwealth) are both premised less on integration and more on self-preservation, with "one nation, two systems" as the common point of reference **(see Addendum 1)**.[26]

These changing attitudes affect how the U.S. should be thinking about future peace solutions on the Korean peninsula. Generally, solutions are situated along two axes: a continuation of the status quo, or a victory of one side over the other. However, the shift in Korean attitudes on unification means that we need to think about peace solutions on the peninsula as being increasingly non-zero sum in nature. Advancing from an armistice to a peace treaty is certainly requisite, but moving beyond that, possible peace solutions could include Korean coexistence and U.S. withdrawal or Korean coexistence with the United States remaining as a peacekeeper on the peninsula. There are other possibilities as well, but the point is that as rethinking on unification occurs, options for the U.S. military presence move beyond the two generally accepted options..

Overview of Events: The U.S.–ROK Alliance

Across a range of criteria that determine the functional success of a military alliance, the U.S.–ROK alliance has done well.[27] The alliance enabled the stationing of 37,000 U.S. troops directly at the point of conflict on the peninsula, which provided the South with an unequivocal symbol of U.S. defense commitment and deterred the North with its "tripwire" presence. The two militaries represent the classic example of an alliance operating under a joint, unitary command (the Combined Forces Command, or CFC) with a common doctrine, as well as with a clear division of combat roles practiced through frequent and extensive joint training. Host country support for the alliance has been strong. Arguably, the U.S. and ROK have evolved to fit the ideal definition of military allies, far more workable and efficient than the U.S.-Australia or U.S.-Saudi Arabia alliances and paralleled only by NATO and the U.S.-Japan alliances.[28] However, the unexpected congeniality of the North-South summit raised all sorts of speculation about the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance. If the likelihood of conflict on the peninsula has been

eradicated by this new era of Korean peace (as some suggest), then what is the purpose of the alliance? Has South Korean tolerance for the burdensome structures of the alliance and its bases and training ranges waned in proportion to the euphoria generated by the summit? Has the summit created a division of interests on the peninsula with the South Koreans "decoupling" their peninsular peace from other issues of concern to the U.S. and Japan? In short, is the alliance increasingly a Cold War anachronism?

Theoretical Relevance: Alliance Interests and Alliance Resiliency

These are hard questions that the alliance must answer in the future, but the emphasis here is on "future." Excited observers drew an immediate and direct causal link between summit atmospherics and the obsolescence of the alliance. Perhaps the most disturbing reaction to the summit is that 53 percent of South Koreans polled said they now dismissed the possibility of renewed North Korean hostilities.[29] It appeals to Korean romanticism to think that the U.S. alliance becomes less necessary because of this bold move by the Koreas, but the fact of the matter is that the alliance is here to stay as long as the threat remains, and perhaps even beyond. The majority of South Korean security thinkers, including Kim Dae-jung himself, have gone on record calling for a security relationship with the U.S. even after unification.[30] Such strategic imperatives do not change easily overnight. Moreover, toasts, warm embraces, and photo-ops do not stop ballistic missiles, nuclear posturing, nor heightened tension in the DMZ. To believe that the summit's platitudes enable Korea to decouple itself from these large, substantive security concerns of Washington and Tokyo would be a grave mistake. In short, while complaints about the intrusive aspects of U.S. bases and training might heat up every time there are kind words between the North and South, the clear-headed among South Korean policy makers will not trade away the Eighth Army for positive atmospherics with Pyongyang.

Second, the argument that the end of the Soviet threat and, more immediately, the Korean detente have highlighted troubling disparities in U.S. and ROK security interests on the peninsula is not a particularly novel revelation. American and South Korean interests are indeed different,

but this has *always* been so. Historically, ROK expectations regarding the credibility of its American ally's commitments have always been local in terms of peninsular security and the zero-sum competition with the North. On the other hand, the U.S. has always seen the Korea issue through the prism of its larger regional or global strategies. Differences emerged occasionally, but were managed well because the American Cold War strategy linked events on the periphery with U.S.-Soviet competition at the core, thereby causing the regional and local views to converge.[31]

Where change from the past has occurred is in the increasing compartmentalization of security and political issues on the peninsula. Family reunions, economic aid, and cultural and sports exchanges are issues discussed largely within the context of North-South dialogue (as confirmed by the June summit). Nuclear proliferation concerns regarding North Korea are addressed in the context of the 1994 Agreed Framework and its institutional offspring, the Korea Energy Development Organization (KEDO) led by the U.S., South Korea and Japan. The armistice and peace treaty fall under the purview of the Four Party talks involving the two Koreas **(see web links**), the U.S. and China. And North Korea's ballistic missile program and terrorism status are negotiated in bilateral U.S.-DPRK channels. These discrete and institutionalized channels for dealing with various aspects of security have clear benefits in the sense that improvements on any one of these channels can provide momentum for others (for example, the North-South summit's positive outcome arguably spilled over to the U.S. decision to lift some economic sanctions against the DPRK, and also led to Pyongyang's reaffirmation of its moratorium on missile tests).

The challenges are also clear. Compartmentalization, some critics argue, can make decoupling of issues within the alliance easier. For example, improvements in North-South relations provide Seoul the luxury of decoupling itself from Washington's and Tokyo's concerns regarding DPRK ballistic missiles and WMD. However, such an argument fails on three counts. First, there are clear overlaps in the groups dealing with issues on the peninsula, which makes decoupling harder (in particular, China and the U.S.). Second, decoupling only makes sense if

there is no value placed on trilateral policy coordination among the U.S., Japan and South Korea as established by the Perry policy review **(see web link)**. A precedent has been set through the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) that makes it as inadvisable for Seoul to spurn an interest in Tokyo's concerns on DPRK missiles as it is for Tokyo to withhold support for Seoul's efforts at consummating family reunions with the North. Finally, South Korean decoupling would be destructive to the entire engagement process in that it would undercut any hope of DPRK access to economic aid provided by international financial institutions in which Japan and the U.S. are the leading players. In sum, divergent interests between the U.S. and ROK are neither new phenomena nor symptomatic of an end to the alliance. Resiliency rests, as it always has, on the political ability to manage these differences well.

Alliance Management Issues

Perhaps the biggest change for the alliance is the increased attention that must be paid to alliance "upkeep" issues. To many alliance-watchers, this became apparent with the North-South summit, as detente corresponded with increased popular South Korean antipathy toward the more intrusive elements of the American military presence.[32] However, the roots of this dynamic lay in the South Korean national legislative elections in spring 2000, in which labor and environmental issues resonated with voters. Such issues traditionally had little traction in Korean politics, but with democratic consolidation and the emergence of a younger generation of voters, the political spectrum has broadened sufficiently to encompass civil-military issues.[33]

What this means for the alliance is that South Korean grievances *vis-a-vis* the status-of-forces agreement (SOFA) – basing and land-use, live-fire exercises, host nation support, and the CFC structures – increasingly will become domestic political issues around which local politicians can gain support. A full discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this analysis, but the U.S. generally enjoys more favorable terms on these elements of the alliance compared with its other alliances, such as NATO and the U.S.-Japan relationship.[34] For example, the CFC has been a delicate sovereignty issue for the two governments. Operational

control was in the hands of a U.S. general until December 1995, when peacetime control and the chief of the military armistice commission were transferred to South Korea. There are increasing calls by South Koreans for wartime operational control.This faces two obstacles, however: (1) the lack of adequate intelligence capabilities (which Seoul also desires the U.S. to provide), and; (2) U.S. reluctance to concede wartime operational control in any theater in which it is engaged. Most likely, an alternative arrangement would need consideration similar to a NATO-type combined control system in wartime, or a U.S.-Japan system of independent control, but with specified guidelines about roles and expectations. With regard to basing, the U.S. currently occupies 78.6 million pyong (1 pyong = 3.3 square meters) for 36,272 troops. While this amounts to a small fraction of total South Korean land (.23 percent), it accounts for 40 percent of the land in metropolitan Seoul.[35] There are increasing South Korean calls for changes in the percentage, location, and terms of land used for the U.S. base presence.[36] Relative to Japan or the Philippines, the ROK provides more exclusive land-use rights to the U.S. (56 percent of the total land used by the U.S. is under exclusive rights). Moreover, the U.S. is not required to compensate the private sector and not held accountable for damages or restoration costs after use.

Major changes to the alliance in any of these dimensions would have to wait until a formal peace settlement on the peninsula. But in the interim, increasing pressures emanate from within the alliance to manage these issues in a noncombustible manner that minimizes the negative externalities of the U.S. base presence. It is important to note that complaints regarding these issues do not signal the end of the alliance. First, these "upkeep" issues would have surfaced on the U.S.–ROK agenda regardless of the recent summit because, as noted above, they are a function of larger democratic consolidation trends in South Korea and the rise of a politically active civil society. Second, contrary to popular perception, the object of these protests is *not* the end of the alliance or the early withdrawal of U.S. forces, but compensation or a means of redressing grievances.[37] Finally, the alliance's focus on these upkeep issues is actually a good omen for its resiliency because it represents a natural evolution in the alliance as the South Korean junior partner seeks a more equitable position in the relationship. This was the path

taken by the U.S.-Japan alliance in the face of problems in Okinawa, and the resulting adjustments have made that alliance stronger. The U.S.–ROK alliance is making this transition as well, complementing the alliance’s tactical clarity with new attention to the upkeep and equity issues.

With all the change that appears to be sweeping the Korean peninsula in the wake of the June 2000 North-South summit, an essay stressing continuities may appear to rain on Korea's parade. Just observing the faces of ordinary Koreans as they viewed the live telecast of the summit in subway stations, coffee houses, and offices sufficed to give one a sense of the cathartic nature of the event, filling a void in the Korean psyche and national identity. One hopes that this iteration of North-South dialogue will not go the route of past initiatives, dying after the initial fanfare and euphoria subsides.

This essay, rather, is an appeal for perspective. The summit has offered the first, brief glimpse at a possible shift in North Korean intentions. This is extremely important but it is also inconclusive. While we may indeed sit at the threshold of long-awaited change on the Korean peninsula and a real chance for lasting peace, clearly the hard work is yet to be done. Intentions could be made clearer by following through on commitments made at the June summit with regard to extensive family reunions, a return visit by the Dear Leader, and the creation of high-level institutions for dialogue. Moreover, credible communication of a change in intentions must be complemented by changes in military capabilities, including the conventional balance of forces, the DPRK's missile and WMD programs, and, beyond these, the status of U.S. forces on the peninsula. It is only with these sorts of changes that the skeptics will be convinced of the possibility of that which we all wish to be true – a peace solution on the Korean peninsula, the most important event in East Asia since the end of the Korean War.

ADDENDUM 1: South-North Joint Declaration

In accordance with the noble will of the entire people who yearn for the peaceful unification of the nation, President Kim Dae-jung of the Republic of Korea and National Defense Commission Chairman Kim Jong-il of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea held a historic meeting and summit talks in Pyongyang from June 13 to June 15, 2000.

The leaders of the South and the North, recognizing that the meeting and the summit talks were of great significance in promoting mutual understanding, developing South-North relations and realizing peaceful unification, declared as follows:

1. The South and the North have agreed to resolve the questions of unification independently and through the joint efforts of the Korean people, who are the masters of the country.
2. For the achievement of unification, we have agreed that there is a common element in the South's concept of a confederation and the North's formula for a loose federation. The South and the North agreed to promote unification in that direction.
3. The South and the North have agreed to promptly resolve humanitarian issues such as exchange visits by separated family members and relatives on the occasion of the August 15 National Liberation Day and the question of unswerving Communists who have been given long prison sentences in the South.
4. The South and the North have agreed to consolidate mutual trust by promoting balanced development of the national economy through economic cooperation and by stimulating cooperation and exchanges in civic, cultural, sports, health, environmental and all other

fields.

5. The South and the North have agreed to hold a dialogue between relevant authorities in the near future to implement the above agreements expeditiously.

President Kim Dae-jung cordially invited National Defense Commission Chairman Kim Jong-il to visit Seoul, and Chairman Kim Jong-il will visit Seoul at an appropriate time.

Kim Dae-jung	Kim Jong-il
President	Chairman National Defense Commission
The Republic of Korea	The Democratic People's Republic of Korea
June 15, 2000	

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ENDNOTES

[1] An earlier and different version of this paper was presented at the Flashpoints in Asia Conference, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia, PA, May 12, 2000. The author thanks Avery Goldstein, Roy Kim, Samuel Kim, and Alfred Wilhelm for comments.

[2] As Secretary of State Albright once stated, "I've always described the DMZ as being on the other side of the moon....It's the last vestige of the Cold War" (quoted in *Korea Times*, 21 June 2000 ["Albright to Assess Post-Summit Koreas"]).

[3] See *Choson Ilbo-Korea Gallup* and *Hankook Ilbo-Media Research* polling results reported in *Korea Herald*, 19 June 2000 ("Summit talks greatly improve image of Kim Jong-il among South Koreans").

[4] For historical debates on the extent to which the Korean War was a civil conflict, see Cumings 1981, Whiting 1960, Weathersby 1993, Christensen 1996, and Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue 1995.

[5] Arguments against engagement focus on its futility in the face of DPRK intransigence. In short, the regime is still bent on subverting the South and will not change in this objective. It will not respond positively to conciliatory gestures by Seoul. Rather, it will perceive such gestures as signs of weakness, which in turn will reinforce the position of hardliners in Pyongyang. As a result, cooperative behavior is best elicited through containment policies that, in conjunction with the North's dire internal situation, press the regime to capitulate. Pro-engagement arguments start from many of the same premises but reach different conclusions. The Northern regime is in dire straits, but hard-line containment is likely to elicit rash and dangerous reactions rather than conciliatory ones. The primary obstacle to North-South dialogue is no longer the Cold War, but the legacies of this four-decade struggle manifest in deeply-rooted mutual distrust and animosity. Conciliatory acts help to dissipate these barriers and open a road to confidence-building. Containment, on the other hand, only reinforces such barriers. Useful treatments of these debates include Eberstadt 1999, Sigal 1998, and Moon and Steinberg 1999.

[6] On the measurement of threats and capabilities, see Walt 1987 and Goldstein 1997/98.

[7] Contrary to 50-plus percent popular reactions in South Korea these days expressing no fear of renewed hostilities on the peninsula in the aftermath of the June 2000 North-South summit, what has rendered the likelihood of conflict less probable is the robust deterrence provided by U.S. and ROK forces, not the positive atmospherics of the summit.

[8] On this view, see *Los Angeles Times* 13 June 2000 (David Kang, "We Should not be Afraid of North Koreans.")

[9] The North's first indigenous operational missile, the Nodong series, derives from SCUD

technology.

[10] For example, Pakistan's Ghauri and Shaheen series are derivative of Nodong technology (for further discussions, see Medeiros n.d..

[11] Concerns abound regarding possible reprocessing activities in 1989 and May-June 1994 which would have provided the DPRK with enough weapons-grade plutonium for several nuclear weapons. See Mansourov 1995.

[12] Earlier battle plans (Operation Plan 5027-95) called for a –ROK counteroffensive against a North Korean invasion that limited the line of attack to the Wonsan and Ch'ongch'on rivers. Operation plan 5027-98 now extends this line of counterattack as far north as the Tumen and Yalu rivers. See Yi 1998 and Halloran 1998.

[13] See Cha 1998 and Cha 2000.

[14] The NLL was unilaterally declared by the United Nations Command after the 1950-53 Korean War, and for the and ROK, represents the "de facto" maritime border. The DPRK does not recognize the line and claims as its own the resource- and fish-rich disputed waters less than 12 miles away from its western coast (the disputed seas are also located less than 12 miles away from South Korean-owned islands in the West Sea).

[15] The policy tools advocated by Washington and Seoul have been outlined in the Kim Dae-jung government's sunshine policy and in the U.S. policy review of North Korea completed by former Secretary of Defense William Perry (**see web links).** For criticisms see the congressional North Korea Advisory Group's website **(see web links)**; "'Sunshine' or Moonshine?" *Wall Street Journal*, 2 March 1999 (editorial); Lee 1996; and Ikle 1998.

[16] For discussions of these scenarios, see Kihl 1994 and Foster-Carter 1992.

[17] For the classic statement of these points, see Morley 1983.

[18] For representative arguments in this debate see Ahn 1994, Eberstadt 1997, and Noland 1997.

[19] Reports released by the Samsung Economic Research Institute and the Construction and Economic Research Institute of Korea (CERIK) in June 2000 as reported in *Joongang Ilbo* 14 June 2000 (Jae-hoon Lee, "Required SOC for NK to Exceed $6 billion), and *Korea Times* 7 June 2000 ("Inter-Korean Infrastructure Projects to Cost W10 Trillion").

[20] The "cost" of unification is generally defined as the amount of investment and capital necessary to bring DPRK production levels to within 40 percent of the ROK's over ten years. For initial estimates and evaluations, see Foster-Carter 1992. For subsequent reassessments that put the cost much higher, see Noland, Robinson, and Liu 1998, Noland 2000, and Goldman Sachs' calculations (reported in *Washington Post*, 19 June 2000).

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[21] These studies pointed out additional considerations that bolster estimates at the higher end. First, estimates on closing the gap between the two economies do not take adequate account of the additional burden when dealing with socialist economies. In most cases, the infrastructure and capital base that exists cannot be built upon (as often assumed by the estimates) but must actually be torn down and rebuilt, meaning even higher costs. Moreover, the availability of foreign investment and capital to finance these costs will probably not meet South Korean expectations because, at least initially, unification will be met with more *unfavorable* international risk ratings.

[22] *Choson Ilbo* poll in Yung-bong Kim 2000: 2-3.

[23] Yung-bong Kim 2000: 4-5.

[24] *Washington Post,* 18 June 2000 (Doug Struck, "In the South, One Korea is Distant Goal").

[25] See Hong 1999.

[26] For an analysis of these two plans, see Koh 1994.

[27] Alliances serve the purpose not just of providing for one's security, but doing so in an efficient and relatively less costly manner than would otherwise be the case (i.e., self-help). In this vein, an alliance's success is measured by the extent to which it: serves as a facilitator of power accretion and projection; operates as a unified command; enables common tactics and doctrine through joint training; promotes a division of security roles; facilitates cooperation in production and development of military equipment: and elicits political support among domestic constituencies. See Snyder 1997.

[28] The -ROK alliance surpasses Japan in its possessing a unitary command, as well as NATO in terms of a clear division of labor and cooperation in the production of some military equipment.

[29] *Choson Ilbo-Gallup Korea* poll (*Korea Herald,* 19 June 2000).

[30] *Seoul Yonhap*, 30 December 1997 ("Kim Dae-jung calls for Post-Reunification US Presence").

[31] Such differences often surfaced when the refused to punish DPRK provocations in accordance with ROK expectations. In the cases of the Blue House Raid by North Korean commandos and the seizure of the USS Pueblo (January 1968), the ROK demanded harsh retaliation as these provocations were seen as tests of resolve on the peninsula. For the , however, the response was decidedly more muted because of desires to avoid actions that might open a second front in Asia. For details, see Cha 1999, ch. 3.

[32] In particular, protests over military use of Koon-ni for training exercises and the disposal of hazardous chemicals in the Han River coincided with the summit's aftermath as well as the 50th anniversary of the Korean War.

[33] This phenomenon was popularly known as the *sam-p'al-yook* (three-eight-six) generation's coming of age in politics (in their thirties, educated in the eighties, born in the sixties).

[34] For elaboration on these and other issues, see Chun-pom Kim 1998 and Ministry of National Defense 1998.

[35] There are 98 bases of which 82 are Army, 14 Air Force, and 2 Navy.

[36] The precedent for this was set in June 1990 when the two governments agreed to the relocation of Yongsan out of central Seoul to Osan and Pyongtaek (facilities to be transferred included headquarters for UN Forces, USFK, CFC, and all supporting troops). After completion of an initial phase (relocation of the Yongsan golf course) in March 1991, the plan was postponed indefinitely by the North Korean nuclear crisis. Since then disputes have arisen over the costs of relocation (originally borne by the ROK government), estimated in 1990 at over 2 trillion won. Adjustments in the terms of land usage are also likely. forces currently occupy 4.34 million pyong in unused land. Complaints are loudest in Kyonggi province and larger cities like Pusan and Taegu. USFK has offered to return 20 million pyong in exchange for 6 million pyong in alternate land.

[37] For example, in the recent South Korean protests over bombing and strafing practices at Koon-ni in the summer 2000, the headlines emphasized calls to end the military presence. In actuality, the inhabitants of the area were seeking compensation and a voice; calls for withdrawal were made by radical fringe student groups whom the inhabitants did not know. See *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, 19, 22 June 2000 (Jim Lea, "Riot Police Clash with Protesters at Koon-ni"; and "Protesters briefly halt training at Koon-ni Range").