

JOINT U.S.-KOREA ACADEMIC STUDIES

Towards Sustainable  
Economic & Security  
Relations in East Asia:

# U.S. AND ROK POLICY OPTIONS



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# **STRATEGIC ABANDONMENT: ALLIANCE RELATIONS IN NORTHEAST ASIA IN THE POST-IRAQ ERA**

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## I. Introduction

The security alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) is the foundation for the architecture of strategic stability in Northeast Asia that has endured for more than a half century. Along with the U.S. alliance with Japan, this security architecture has maintained the balance of power despite vast geopolitical changes, not least the end of the global Cold War. It provided an environment that fostered spectacular economic growth and the institutionalization of democratic governance.

The stability created under this strategic architecture is now challenged by a unique combination of three developments—the rise of China, North Korea’s bid to become a nuclear power, and the weakening of the United States in the wake of the Iraq War.

These events disturb the carefully crafted balance of power that was created during the Cold War era. China’s growth as an economic and military power, combined with its aspirations for regional leadership, creates an alternative pole of power to the United States. The defiant decision of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) to test a nuclear device threatens the security of Korea and Japan and opens the door to further proliferation in the region.

These two developments have been widely discussed among policymakers and experts in the region and in the United States. But there has been little examination of the dangerous dynamic between these events and the Iraq War. The deteriorating military and political situation in Iraq and in the Middle East more broadly has significantly weakened the United States in East Asia. It has swung public opinion against the United States and, as collateral damage, undermined support for the alliances. The focus of U.S. attention and resources on the Middle East feeds a perception that U.S. interest in East Asia is declining. More profoundly, it encourages powers such as China and Russia to assert more frequently and more boldly their desire for a more multipolar power structure.

The war has also depleted the U.S. force structure in the Pacific, drawing all the U.S. Army and Marine Corps ground forces committed to the Pacific theater into active deployment in Iraq. The global redeployment of U.S. forces has already produced a significant drop in force levels in Korea and plans are to move forces currently based in Japan to bases in Guam and elsewhere. Although U.S. naval and air forces in the Pacific remain at significant levels, it is not credible that the United States could commit large numbers to the defense of Korea in the event of a major conflict.

It is impossible to know how this diminished capability has affected the thinking of the North Korean leadership, but it seems likely that they have not overlooked this shift in

resources. The perception of a United States bogged down in Iraq could only have encouraged them to take the risk, one previously avoided, of testing a nuclear device.

The specter of a United States weakened in Iraq, facing a rising great power and an unpredictable new nuclear state, feeds fears of abandonment in both the ROK and Japan. In Japan there is growing concern that the United States is willing to reach an agreement with the DPRK that leaves a small nuclear arsenal intact but contains the problem of proliferation of nuclear materials or technology to what is seen as a more serious threat of proliferation in Iran. This raises the danger of a separation of vital national security interests between the two allies—for Japan, even a small nuclear arsenal in North Korea poses an existential threat, given the density of its urban populations. Japanese concerns about North Korea often are a surrogate for deeper anxieties about the rise of China and apprehensions that the United States might seek a partnership with China at the expense of Japan.

While it has been less visible, fears of abandonment have also been growing in the ROK. These were sparked in part by the downsizing of the U.S. forces in Korea and the decision to bring the Combined Forces Command to a close, as I will discuss in more detail below. But, as in Japan, there is also a strategic worry about China's growing influence in the region and on the Korean peninsula in particular and, secondarily, a concern about Japan's growing military role. The possibility that Korea may become caught between these two powers without a strong U.S. presence in the region has emerged as an argument in some Korean circles for preserving the alliance with the United States.

Historically, and it remains true today, fears of abandonment by the United States have been paired with the fear of entanglement. Koreans and Japanese have worried about being drawn into wider conflicts by their U.S. ally as a result of their security commitments. That has been a persistent issue in Japan, for example, in the use of the U.S. bases on Okinawa to support combat operations in Vietnam, Taiwan, and Korea. More recently this issue emerged in Korea in response to the U.S. desire for "strategic flexibility" in using Korea-based forces for regional or global operations.

Entanglement fears draw upon the natural desire of both allies, and elites in both countries, to free themselves from excessive dependency on the United States and to assert greater independence in the formation of foreign and security policies. This has been more evident in Korea in the past seven years, a time when Koreans have felt a growing separation between their approach to containing North Korea and the policies of the George W. Bush administration. But even in Japan, during a time when the security alliance has been closer than ever before, Japanese policymakers have pushed for more autonomy.

In both countries, however, the fear of abandonment has historically been by far the most powerful determinant of policy. Owing in part to the legacy of dependency and to geopolitical isolation, both Koreans and Japanese have worried more about being left alone than about being dragged into unwanted conflicts. Arguably, the Korean and Japanese decisions to dispatch forces to Iraq and to support the war in Afghanistan were driven more by this fear than by support for those wars. Korean and Japanese policymakers needed, for different reasons, to keep the United States close and understood that their support for U.S. policy in the Middle East would help accomplish that goal.

The separation of U.S. security interests from those of its allies in Korea and Japan, combined with a perception of the decline of U.S. strength and interest in East Asia, creates the danger of strategic abandonment. The consequences of fear of strategic abandonment are multiple and should be of serious concern to U.S. policymakers, as well as those who support the alliance system in East Asia. One consequence is to propel Korea and Japan into a closer embrace of China, and potentially Russia. Another possible outcome is to increase instability, including the risk of conflict arising out of miscalculation.

Strategic abandonment fear is fed by, and in turn encourages, rising nationalism in both Korea and Japan. The upsurge in nationalism already impacts the alliances with the United States. Conservative Japanese nationalism feeds off increased tensions with China over history issues, often accompanied by demands that the United States take sides in such disputes. President Roh Moo-hyun of South Korea tapped into Korean nationalism in a manner that, whether intended or not, served to loosen ties with the United States.

Perhaps the most serious danger posed by the fear of strategic abandonment is that of nuclear proliferation, that Korea and Japan might seek to replace what is seen as a degraded guarantee of extended deterrence from the United States with their own nuclear capability. This may seem the least likely outcome of strategic abandonment, given the domestic political, technical, and international restraints on both countries going nuclear. But it is potentially the most worrisome development, and it is not without precedent.

The dynamic between fears of entanglement and abandonment in our alliance relationships in Northeast Asia is not unique. U.S. postwar alliances in Europe have been characterized by the same pattern: allies have sought to maximize their role in defining broad strategy toward the Soviet Union and now toward other adversaries while they attempt to limit their obligations to carry out those policies. This is as true of our alliance with Britain as it has been with Germany, and certainly France.

Nuclear policy in Europe has in particular struggled with this pattern of alliance relations. In response to the Soviet nuclear threat to Europe and the European allies' concern about the reliability of the U.S. response, our allies sought assurance of extended deterrence in the form of the deployment of U.S. intermediate nuclear forces in Europe. But they also opted, in the case of Britain and France, for creation of an independent nuclear deterrent. At the same time, our allies feared being dragged into unwanted confrontation with the Soviets and pursued their own strategies of engagement.

## **II. The Vietnam War Era: The Historical Precedent**

The current convergence of developments in Northeast Asia—the rise of China, North Korea's nuclear challenge, and the weakening of U.S. power owing to the war in Iraq—has a historical precedent in the Vietnam War era. During the period of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, from the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s, there was also a combination of a growing Chinese challenge, increased North Korean adventurism, and a sense of U.S. weakness. This created a fear of abandonment among U.S. allies in the ROK and Japan, a perception that produced a serious proliferation risk.

At the opening of the U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, revolutionary China was already rising as a threat to regional stability. The Chinese were backing a bid for power by the communists in Indonesia as well as encouraging the Vietnamese, Khmer, and Lao insurgencies. In October 1964, the Chinese conducted their first test of a nuclear warhead, followed in 1966 by the test of a missile-delivered warhead, and a year later by the test of a hydrogen bomb. Together with growing evidence that Beijing was at odds with its Soviet allies, particularly in the decision to pursue a nuclear capability, these developments created visible unease about security, particularly in Japan and, to a lesser extent, the ROK.

The security threat from the DPRK, which leaned toward Beijing in the growing Sino-Soviet dispute, also escalated during this period. The DPRK leadership saw the United States bogged down in Vietnam and the ROK weakened by the decision to deploy elite units to assist the U.S. military campaign in Vietnam. They carried out a series of actions, testing U.S. and Korean will—beginning with the commando assault on the Blue House in 1968, followed two days later by the seizure of the USS *Pueblo*, and also repeated attempts to assassinate President Park Chung-hee, the most spectacular of which took place in Seoul in 1974.

The tide of U.S. fortunes in Vietnam, particularly after the Tet offensive of 1968 and President Johnson's subsequent decision not to seek reelection, began to feed a perception in Northeast Asia of U.S. weakness and retreat.

A secret assessment by a senior State Department official of Japanese attitudes (Sneider 1968), entitled “Japan: Partner in Possible Disarray,” captured this shift:

Contributing to the current discontent has been the assumption of many that [Prime Minister] Sato was acting not in Japan’s own interests but at U.S. behest. But, more important, a good number of Japanese are having second thoughts about U.S. staying power in Asia. U.S. balance of payments difficulties, the Tet offensive, the Pueblo incident, domestic disorders and the President’s March 31 speech are all cited as evidences of U.S. weakness. In separate private conversations, the Governor of the Bank of Japan Usami, Foreign Minister Miki and a leading conservative friend of the U.S. each revealed doubts about our Vietnam and Asian policies...

These frustrations with the U.S. have inevitably turned more and more Japanese to brooding about the need for an “independent” Japanese foreign policy—e.g. escaping from what Miki has called “excessive dependence” on the U.S.

The growing Japanese fear of abandonment spurred talk of developing nuclear weapons, particularly after the Chinese nuclear test. In a December 1964 conversation with Edwin Reischauer, U.S. ambassador to Japan, ahead of his visit to Washington, Prime Minister Sato launched into a discussion of nuclear defense, citing the example of the British nuclear deterrent. “If the other fellow has nuclear weapons, it is only common sense to have them oneself,” Sato said, citing Prime Minister Harold Wilson of the United Kingdom. The Japanese public was not ready for this but would have to be educated and the younger generation showed signs of going this way, he told Reischauer (see Reischauer [1964]).

Sato told Johnson the next month in Washington that Japan should acquire nuclear weapons in response to China’s nuclear capability. While Sato declared Japan’s three non-nuclear principles in 1967—commitments not to manufacture, possess, or allow the introduction of nuclear weapons into Japan—he privately continued to raise the possibility of going nuclear (Kase 2001).

Sato’s Cabinet Information Research Office commissioned a comprehensive study of the nuclear option, which was carried out in two parts in 1968 and 1970. The first part examined the technical, economic, and organizational issues related to developing nuclear weapons, and the second part focused on the costs and benefits from a strategic, political, and diplomatic perspective. The report concluded that, although Japan was capable of developing the weapons, it would do irreparable damage to U.S.-Japan security relations. Japan, the authors argued, could not afford to follow



the French path. Japan was still better off continuing to depend on the U.S. nuclear umbrella. But Japanese policymakers, not unlike their counterparts in Europe, were concerned that the United States would not risk its own security to respond to a threat mounted by a nuclear China against Japan alone.

To some extent, the talk of going nuclear was intended to force the United States to strengthen its commitment to provide extended deterrence to Japan. It also helped convince the United States that it needed to return Okinawa to Japanese sovereignty and other steps designed to bolster the alliance in the eyes of the Japanese populace.

Those efforts were almost undermined by the Nixon “shocks”—the secret decision to establish détente with China—which also reverberated in South Korea. Privately officials in both countries were convinced that the United States had made deals with the Chinese at their expense. “How long can we trust the United States?” President Park asked in an off-the-record meeting with Korean reporters on the day Kissinger’s secret trip to China was announced (Oberdorfer 2001, 13).

The impact of the Vietnam War was even more serious for the ROK. The North Korean escalation shook the leadership in Seoul, which wanted to bring back its forces from South Vietnam. Doubts about U.S. strength and commitment grew after newly elected U.S. president, Richard Nixon, proclaimed the so-called Guam Doctrine in 1969, calling on America’s Asian allies to take more responsibility for their own defense. The abrupt decision to withdraw the 7th Infantry Division from Korea in 1971, despite strong opposition from President Park, was a turning point in undermining confidence in the U.S. security guarantee. The U.S. retreat from Vietnam in 1975, followed by newly elected President Jimmy Carter’s decision to withdraw the rest of U.S. ground forces from Korea only deepened that fear of abandonment.

The South Korean government began a serious program to develop its own nuclear weapons, part of a broader effort to seek greater defense autonomy and capability. According to Park Chung-hee’s daughter, Park Geun-hye, in an interview with the *Monthly Chosun*, Park took the initial steps to go nuclear in response to the U.S. decision to pull out the 7th Division.<sup>1</sup>

According to the Central Intelligence Agency, citing a senior Korean official, the planning to develop the capacity to construct a nuclear warhead may have begun in 1969, with the aim of completing it by the late 1970s. “Pak’s [Park’s] desire for advanced weapons appears to be part of an overall effort to develop military strength

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1. Hong Sung Gul’s paper (2002) is the most complete account of the South Korean nuclear weapons program and the U.S. response.

in the event US forces leave Korea,” the CIA (1974) concluded. “He is signaling—and may have intended his remarks to reach US officials—an ability and desire to assert Korea’s military independence from the US and implying that Seoul will be able to stand alone against the North in the foreseeable future.”

The lack of a clear U.S. policy regarding its long-term military presence in Korea drove the nuclear program, U.S. officials concluded. “These uncertainties lead President Park into preparations for what he sees as our eventual withdrawal, preparations which include internal repression and plans for the development of nuclear weapons,” a secret cable from the U.S. Embassy (Sneider 1975) warned in June 1975. “They also induce optimism on the part of North Korea about our withdrawal and doubts in Japan about our credibility and about the future of Korea.”

The United States forcefully intervened over several years, blocking Seoul’s efforts to acquire nuclear technology from France and Canada while threatening to break off the security alliance itself. But the United States also compensated Seoul with support for its nuclear energy program, access to advanced conventional weapons technology, a slowing of plans to withdraw U.S. troops, and strengthening extended deterrence. The creation of the Combined Forces Command (CFC) in 1978 as an integrated headquarters command between U.S. and ROK forces was also prompted by the need to counter fears of abandonment.

The United States also reconsidered plans to withdraw U.S. nuclear weapons from Korea. A CIA report (1977) on the implications of withdrawing those weapons warned, “Seoul will read the total withdrawal of nuclear weapons as evidence of US intent to forgo their use in a future conflict.” President Park might resume the nuclear weapons program if there was any further “reduction in the credibility of the US alliance,” the memo said.

### **III. Abandonment Fears after the North Korean Nuclear Test**

The partially successful test of a nuclear device by the DPRK on 9 October 2006 triggered a major crisis of confidence on the security system in Northeast Asia. Despite repeated threats from the United States and its security allies in the ROK and Japan that this constituted an “unacceptable” step, the DPRK leadership proceeded with fanfare. And while the Chinese government also warned against this step, there was considerable concern in Tokyo and to a lesser extent in Washington and Seoul that it had not seriously tried to halt the nuclear test.

The diplomatic process that has unfolded since the test seemed to only confirm the North Korean belief that it could not only survive the immediate international response but that its negotiating leverage would be enhanced. The 13 February 2007 agreement

that followed the resumption of negotiations seemed to confirm the North Korean calculation. It may of course lead to full denuclearization of the DPRK. Unfortunately there is also reason to assume that the DPRK will cling to the enhanced political and military power it gained from even a small and unproven nuclear arsenal. In any case, until diplomacy yields a different outcome, we must face the reality of Pyongyang's nuclear breakthrough.

The U.S, ROK, and Japan are now compelled to consider the implications of a nuclear North Korea. In the case of the ROK, as discussed below, the initial response has been largely to add impetus to the engagement policies of the Roh Moo-hyun administration. The convening of a second North-South summit in Pyongyang in October 2007 clearly reflected the belief of the Roh administration that a rapid deepening of economic, political, and even military engagement with the North offered the only answer to the nuclear crisis. Fears of entanglement—most specifically the fear of being dragged into a conflict on the peninsula as a result of the actions of the United States and others—remain strong. But there is also a palpable fear of abandonment that has also been touched off, one that is likely to find greater expression after the upcoming presidential election in the ROK.

Before looking at the Korean response, we need to understand the reaction in Japan. The nuclear test is clearly a catalyst for an eruption of strategic anxiety in Japan, most interestingly expressed in the most widespread and public discussion of the nuclear option in the postwar period. This discussion does not by any means lead to the conclusion that Japan will go nuclear at any time in the near future,<sup>2</sup> but it does indicate a growing danger of strategic abandonment that undermines alliance relations and stability in the region.

This discussion began following the North Korean missile test in July and the reports that a nuclear test might be imminent. While a greater sense of threat and rising nationalism fed this public debate, the main driver has been a fear of U.S. abandonment. "There are countries with nuclear weapons in Japan's vicinity," former prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone said on 5 September (Kyodo News Service 2006), announcing a study of Japan's security options to be conducted by the Institute for International Policy Studies (IIPS), a think tank that he founded. "We are currently dependent on U.S. nuclear weapons (as a deterrent) but it is not necessarily known whether the U.S. attitude will continue."

The *Asahi Shimbun* 14 October 2006 reported that Nakasone stated that, while maintaining the three non-nuclear principles, Japan "should consider the nuclear issue

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2. For the most up-to-date and thorough discussion of this issue, see Hughes (2007).

in order to ensure we are prepared for the possibility of a major change in international society. By ‘major change’ we are thinking of such extreme cases as the United States renouncing the protection of alliance partners under its nuclear umbrella or the complete collapse of the US-Japan alliance.”

The focus on North Korea is to some extent a barely disguised, but more politically acceptable, reaction to the rise of China, including its military buildup. According to Takashi Kawakami (2007), who is directing the IIPS study, the current situation is an echo of the response to China’s nuclear tests in the 1960s. Japanese policymakers are not aiming at going nuclear themselves as much as seeking guarantees of extended deterrence to calm fears of abandonment.

“In the future,” says Kawakami (2007), “Japan might be faced with abandonment by the US if the US chooses to get close to China.” The nuclear discussion in Japan is driven by a perception of threat—of a Korean peninsula unified with nuclear weapons and uncertainty about China—but the most serious issue is “nervousness about which direction the US is taking in the future.” There are increasing concerns in Japanese policy circles, he reports, about a situation resembling the post-Vietnam era, with an inward-looking United States and a Democratic administration led by Hillary Clinton that is “inclined to abandon Japan.”<sup>3</sup>

Conservative media in Japan carried even more lurid discussions of Japan’s vulnerability and the need to explore the nuclear option. Japanese security experts tend to dismiss this as chatter, not a serious discussion of what moving toward nuclear capability might mean. But the talk reflects a growing strategic separation that is developing between Japan and the United States.

Those concerns prompted Japanese government officials to privately ask the United States for a public restatement of the extended deterrence commitment.<sup>4</sup> This request was made when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Japan on 18 October 2006, less than two weeks after the North Korean test.

“I confirmed with Secretary Rice that the U.S. commitment to providing deterrence under the Japan-U.S. security system will be maintained,” then foreign minister Aso Taro said at a joint press conference (DOS 2006). “That is to say that the U.S.

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3. The Japanese press seized upon Hillary Clinton’s essay (2007) on her foreign policy views as evidence of that tilt. In regard to Asia, the essay said that the U.S. relationship with China “may be the most important bilateral relationship in the world in this century.” Japan, which used to have that label, barely rated a mention in the essay.

4. This request was related by senior Japanese Foreign Ministry officials in an interview with the author.

commitment to defend Japan under the Japan-U.S. security system will be maintained under any circumstances.”

Rice responded (DOS 2006) that “the United States has the will and the capability to meet the full range—and I underscore full range—of its deterrent and security commitments to Japan.”

Japanese concerns were not entirely assuaged by this statement. Conservative Japanese politicians repeatedly questioned the credibility of the U.S. security guarantees to Japan. Liberal Democratic Party leader Shoichi Nakagawa called for a debate on the nuclear option. “What is the nuclear umbrella?” Nakagawa asked in an interview in the magazine *Shukan Bunshun* on 2 November 2006. “We should give thought to such a fundamental matter. . . . Thinking there is no need even for debate because of the Japan-U.S. alliance is laughable. Is the US that kind?”

Conservative commentators also linked this to the China threat. Suppose China attacked the Senkaku Islands, the island group in the East China Sea that is disputed territory with China and the location of major oil and gas fields, asked former ambassador Hisahiko Okazaki, a close adviser to former prime minister Shinzo Abe, in a report in the *Sankei Shimbun* of 9 November 2006. Would the United States come to the defense of Japan? If Japan had nuclear weapons, would it cause China to think twice, Okazaki wondered.

Within a fairly limited circle of Japanese security experts, there is the beginning of a debate over options. The nuclear option itself is widely criticized as both counterproductive in its impact on Japan’s security and ineffective in dealing with threats. Almost all Japanese analysts rule out any path that would be opposed by the United States. There is some discussion of adopting what is called the “Two and a Half Non-Nuclear Principles”—or just two—which refers to either accepting the movement of U.S. nuclear weapons through Japan more openly or actual deployment of those weapons into Japan. This is seen as a means of locking in the nuclear umbrella.

Those views remain in a small minority, but worries about the credibility of extended deterrence are considerable and Japanese officials continue to press for public statements to reassure their public. As recently as May 2007, in the Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee (DOS 2007) of the two nations, the “U.S. reaffirmed that the full range of U.S. military capabilities—both nuclear and non-nuclear strike forces and defensive capabilities—form the core of extended deterrence and support U.S. commitments to the defense of Japan.”

Despite these reassurances, Japanese fears of abandonment have actually accelerated, in large part owing to the engagement of U.S. diplomacy with the DPRK. Japanese

policymakers, echoed by the media, complain that the United States will make a deal that leaves unresolved Japan's bilateral issues with the DPRK—the abduction of Japanese nationals. More seriously, Japanese policymakers worry that the United States is ready to accept a freeze on the North's nuclear program that will severely restrict its ability to proliferate nuclear weapons and technology to Iran but will leave intact a small arsenal and missile delivery systems sufficient to threaten Japan.

The recent debate over the extension of Japan's military role in the Indian Ocean has reflected these feelings of fear of abandonment. Asked whether the United States is the only country that would come to the defense of Japan, a prominent lawmaker from the opposition Democratic Party of Japan, Kazuhiro Haraguchi, responded in the *Tokyo Shimbun* of 9 September 2007:

That is not true. Bogged down in the Iraq war, the United States was not able to take military action following a nuclear test by North Korea. The United States is trying to de-list North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism despite the issue of Japanese abducted by North Korea. Japan is being ignored despite its commitment to the United States. No one spares time or energy for the weak follower.

The Iraq War has also served to feed those who seek greater independence in the formulation of Japanese foreign policy, though still within the framework of the alliance. Democratic Party of Japan leader Ichiro Ozawa led the opposition to extension of Japan's maritime deployment in large part on the grounds that it had become conflated with operations in support of the Iraq War, a war without international justification and support.

“The United States is always overconfident of its own unilateralism, and it does not notice that its actions are disrupting the international community, starting with the United Nations,” Ozawa (2007) wrote recently. “If Japan is to really be an ally of the US (and it is the same for other allies), it should hold its head up high and strive to give proper advice to the US.”

Ozawa (2007) made it clear that he saw the Iraq War as a manifestation of that unilateralism:

The Iraq war was carried out by the US and British forces launching strikes. . . . In the UN, France, supposed to be an ally, was opposed. Russia was also opposed, and so was China. In spite of that, the US and Britain on their own accord launched the Iraq war. Moreover, it was revealed later that there was no truth to Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction, claimed as the reason for the war. Both the US and

Britain had no choice but to admit that their justification for the Iraq war had been lost.

#### **IV. Korea: Between Entanglement and Abandonment**

Historically, for South Korea, the fear of abandonment has been the dominant factor in determining security policy and the approach to the alliance with the United States. U.S. proposals to reduce or withdraw its armed forces from Korea have been met in the past with alarm and protest. And while the desire for Koreanization of the country's defense capabilities has been a constant of defense planning since the Park Chung-hee era, Koreans have hesitated to take full responsibility for their own security.

This historical position has changed significantly in the past decade as a result of democratization, the movement toward engagement and rapprochement with the DPRK, and the growth of Korean nationalism, especially among the younger generation. Fear of entrapment has taken the place of fear of abandonment to some extent. The clearest expression of this is a belief that the United States would unilaterally carry out a preemptive war against North Korea—a scenario that was widely discussed in Korean media in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion. The U.S. pressure for Korean involvement in the Iraq conflict also prompted opposition on the grounds that this was entangling Korea in a war it did not truly support.

“The balance of the two fears in the U.S.-ROK alliance relationship is also perceived differently across generations,” argues sociologist Lee Sook-jong (2005), a former senior fellow at Korea's Sejong Institute. “The fear of abandonment is less acute among younger South Koreans, perhaps because they tend to believe that the United States will never abandon South Korea due to its strategic value. By contrast, older South Koreans fear that the anti-U.S. voices of South Korean youth and policy discord between Washington and Seoul regarding North Korea's nuclear problem will induce the United States to rethink the strategic value of South Korea and no longer commit to the country's defense.”

The desire for greater autonomy appeared to be the main motivator for the Roh Moo-hyun administration's advocacy of defense reforms aimed at greater self-reliance as well as the demand to transfer wartime operational control to the ROK, bringing the CFC structure to a close. Those demands coincided with U.S. plans to restructure its forces in Korea. The initial goal, discussed within the framework of the Future of the Alliance (FOTA) talks, was to relocate U.S. forces in Korea away from their “trip-wire” position on the front lines to a position south of the Han River. The intent was to give the forces greater mobility and to consolidate the U.S. base imprint and reduce conflicts over the U.S. military presence.

But this FOTA discussion was overtaken, in response to the 9/11 attacks and the Iraq War, by a larger global redeployment of U.S. forces under the direction of U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. This led to a U.S. decision in June 2004, undertaken without significant consultation, to reduce its ground forces in Korea by one-third (12,500 troops out of 37,000). The 2nd Brigade of the 2nd Infantry Division was deployed to Iraq in the summer of 2004 and at least one brigade of the 2nd Infantry Division has been regularly rotating since then into Iraq. The decision to station the 2nd Infantry Division south of Seoul now appears to be less a matter of coping with a North Korean attack than of facilitating the use of the principal U.S. ground force unit on the peninsula for missions outside of Korea. At the same time, the Defense Department proposed to accelerate the timetable for the transfer of wartime command to 2009, much faster than the Koreans themselves had proposed.

Some South Korean officials have suggested that Rumsfeld was motivated in part by his reaction to South Korean anti-Americanism. According to former presidential adviser Moon Chung-in, Rumsfeld shouted “God damn it! Get them out!” when watching a television news broadcast of U.S. military police personnel bleeding after being hit by a stone thrown by student protestors.<sup>5</sup> Rumsfeld’s irritation with Korean nationalism was not a secret, but it seems likely that this shift has been a matter of necessity more than of choice—it is dictated by the shortage of ground forces available for duty in Iraq.

The combination of the U.S. withdrawal of its forces and the dissolution of the CFC began, however, to revive the fears of abandonment that had been subsumed in the public mind, and certainly in the policies of the Roh administration, by the fear of entanglement. These concerns were most visibly voiced in the conservative media, mostly by policy elites and by leaders of the opposition Grand National Party (GNP). The North Korea ballistic missile tests in July 2006 unleashed this wave, and the nuclear test in October gave it fuller throat.

“A full withdrawal of U.S. troops from Korea is now a foregone conclusion,” wrote conservative columnist Kim Dae-joong (2006). “It is probably correct to assume that if a nuclear war breaks out in the Korean Peninsula, the U.S. will not throw its ground troops here, though there could be Air Force support.”

Opposition to the transfer of wartime command also began to surface during that summer, initially from former military officers, in anticipation of the annual meeting of defense ministers scheduled for October 2006 in Washington, D.C., when a timetable

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5. This incident, originally reported in *Dong-a Ilbo* on 28 August 2004, was cited in *Armed Forces and Society* (2007).



and road map for the command transfer was to be finalized. In September, for example, 160 former diplomats, including three former cabinet ministers, issued a joint statement (reported in the *Korea Times* of 11 September 2006), arguing that Korea needed more time to strengthen its defense capabilities and to build public consensus before taking back command authority.

The conservative and elite protests forced the Roh administration to extend the date for the command transfer. The allies had agreed to a flexible transition timeline, between 15 October 2009 and 15 March 2012. But the North Korean nuclear test in October undermined public confidence in South Korea's ability to take up much of the burden of its own defense.

A resolution adopted in February 2007 by the National Assembly's Defense Committee, under the leadership of the GNP, urged a halt to the transfer until the nuclear crisis was fully settled. Nearly half the country's lawmakers sent a letter to this effect a day before the defense chiefs of the ROK and the United States were set to meet to finalize the transfer date. "North Korea's ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons pose a grave threat to the security of Northeast Asia as well as on the peninsula," said Rep. Hwang Jin-ha, a former military officer and leader of the GNP initiative on this issue; his statement was reported in the *Korea Times* of 22 February 2007.

The defense chiefs finally agreed to set the transfer date back to 2012, but the issue has still not died. In a joint statement, a group of 57 former senior defense officials called for the nullification of the agreement. They called on the next government to reassess the transfer timeline on the basis of security conditions on the peninsula. "The Republic of Korea now faces a daunting security challenge from North Korea's first-ever nuclear bomb test last October," the statement, reported in the *Korea Times* on 28 February 2007, said. "But the government is pushing for dismantling the ROK-US Combined Forces Command, the most effective security formula to deter an attack from North Korea and ensure overwhelming U.S. reinforcements in the case of war." The GNP has pledged to review the plan, though not necessarily to roll it back entirely, if the party wins the December 2007 presidential election.

Behind these statements is a debate among Korean security experts on the implications for South Korea's security of a nuclear-armed North Korea. The Roh administration has embraced a view popular among some Korean specialists that a North Korean nuclear capability is not a significant threat to South Korea itself: Pyongyang would not target the South but rather sees the weapon as a deterrent against possible U.S. attack and for use as a bargaining chip.

In a lengthy analysis published in 2004, former defense ministry arms control expert, Cheon Seong-whun, a senior research fellow at the Korea Institute for National

Unification, challenged that conventional wisdom. Although North Korea would not be able to use or threaten the use of nuclear weapons against the United States, in fear of massive retaliation, “North Korea might feel free to intimidate or attack South Korea with nuclear weapons,” Cheon (2004, 56) wrote.

The defense policy expert (Cheon 2004, 56–57) expressed growing doubt about the validity of U.S. extended deterrence, especially in light of tensions between the allies, a view not confined to him alone:

South Korea is officially under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. . . . This means that if attacked by Pyongyang, Washington will exercise full options including possible use of nuclear weapons to defend Seoul. But South Koreans’ confidence in the U.S. nuclear umbrella has been diminishing. . . . Under the circumstances, North Korea is much less likely to worry about nuclear retaliation from the United States in defense of South Korea and thus, can fully enjoy its freedom to take advantage of nuclear-related options from threat manipulation to actual use.

Cheon suggests that the North Koreans could even demonstrate their capability in the midst of a crisis to force a South Korean capitulation.

Cheon also echoed wider worries about Japan’s military role. He suggested that the United States could encourage Japan to acquire nuclear weapons as a counter to a North Korean nuclear capability or to prod China into action. “Japan’s nuclear weapon in excuse of nuclear-armed North Korea is a more ominous outcome than North Korea’s nuclear weapon and should be prevented from happening,” Cheon (2004, 69) wrote.

Some Korean security analysts link the North Korean threat to U.S. weakness resulting from its involvement in the Middle East. “People still worry that North Korea would feel more at liberty to challenge and intimidate South Korea with its superiority in weapons of mass destruction and missiles,” wrote Hong Kyu-dok (2006, 119), a policy adviser to the ROK army chief of staff and the defense and foreign ministries. “Only few believe that the U.S. would be able to retaliate against Pyongyang since it is bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

Among more conservative Korean analysts, similar in some ways to their ideological counterparts in Japan, the 13 February agreement in the six-party talks was criticized for potentially leaving in place a nuclear capability that did not threaten the United States but posed a threat to South Korea and Japan.

“The U.S. may deny it, but we feel betrayed by America,” wrote commentator Kim Dae-joong (2007b). “The U.S. is starting to reveal that it is committed to the protection of South Korea in form only, and that it does to wish to undertake any substantive duties. . . . The central axis of the Korean problem is moving away from one tripartite structure—of South Korea, the U.S., and Japan—to another: the U.S., China, and North Korea.”

Kim argued then and in a subsequent column (Kim 2007a) that South Korea now had to reconsider the nuclear option for itself:

We need the defense equipment that allows us to cope with North Korea’s nuclear weapons. That means we need to reconsider our position on nuclear weapons.

We are surrounded by countries that either have or are capable of building nuclear arms. Because it has nuclear weapons, North Korea has been able to survive and negotiate with the big powers. Of course, China also has nuclear weapons, and the stark reality is that Japan, with a nuclear reprocessing plant, is capable of making nuclear arms any time it needs to. In addition, if we cannot expect the support of the nuclear umbrella provided by the U.S., we could be left helpless at a crossroads in East Asia amidst a forest of nuclear weapons. . . . As long as it tolerates North Korea’s nuclear weapons, the U.S. has no justification for preventing any country that is desperate to survive from developing its own.

This is a view at the end of the spectrum to be sure. Others suggest that extended deterrence can be reinforced through the reintroduction of U.S. nuclear weapons into the Korean peninsula, an idea that also has little backing. But these views hint at a broader dialogue that has been somewhat buried out of sight, other than in conservative newspapers, by the ability of the current administration to influence public discourse.

This does not suggest there is a shift of opinion against the policy of engagement with North Korea. Both the ruling and opposition parties broadly support that basic strategy. But belief in economic engagement does not necessarily clash with the sense of a growing fear of abandonment and apprehension of about losing the security and stability provided by the alliance system.

This is reflected, somewhat indirectly, in a subtle swing of South Korean public opinion. The Pew Global Attitudes Project (2007) conducted a new survey of some 47 countries during the spring of 2007. The poll offers comparative data across countries and also compares with previous polling data in Korea taken in 2003 and 2002, when anti-U.S. opinions were at their height.

U.S. favorability has risen significantly in Korea—from 46 percent in 2003 to 58 percent in 2007, comparable with the view of the United States in Japan and India. It is interesting, though, that this is a differentiated view as Koreans by large margins do not support the U.S.-led war on terrorism; neither do they have much confidence in President George W. Bush.

At the same time, unfavorable views of China are growing in Korea—from 31 percent in 2002 to 42 percent in 2007. China's economic growth in particular is seen as a "bad thing" for Korea by 60 percent of respondents. For contrast, the Japanese, although they have an even more unfavorable view of China, tend to see China's economic growth as a good thing for their country.

The presidential election campaign in South Korea seems to also reflect this shift of opinion, with the conservative GNP candidate Lee Myung-bok holding a commanding lead in polls, with a second conservative candidate also commanding large support. At this writing, the vote has not yet taken place so it is too early to be sure if these trends will continue. But it is certainly possible that the next Blue House administration will be closer to the views of those Koreans for whom strategic abandonment is a key issue.

## **V. Conclusion: Countering Strategic Abandonment**

U.S. policymakers have begun to explore the implications of the strategic disaster by the Bush administration in Iraq, focusing most of all on the region itself. At an earlier stage of the conflict, the impact on U.S. alliance partnerships was mostly examined in the context of Europe. When it comes to East Asia, analysts have tended to comment broadly on the problem of neglect, the way the Iraq War has sucked up all the attention of senior officials.

Less attention has been paid to the corrosive effect of the Iraq War, and the perception of U.S. weakness that it creates, on our alliances in Northeast Asia with the ROK and Japan. In part, this effect was concealed by the apparent support for the war by our allies, both of whom have supplied forces on the ground and logistical support to the war effort. As we have discussed above, however, that support was driven in large part by a deeper fear of U.S. abandonment and a desire to ensure U.S. support for Korean and Japanese policy goals in the region.

The perception of U.S. weakness, of resources and attention focused on the Middle East at the expense of vital interests in Asia, has intersected with the visible rise of Chinese power and authority, especially in the region, and the inability of the United

States to halt North Korea's assertion of its status as a nuclear weapons state. This combination has fed a growing fear of abandonment, which coexists alongside the fear of becoming entangled by the United States in unwanted conflicts.

The fear of abandonment is not a new phenomenon in the U.S. alliance relationship with the ROK and Japan. We saw a similar convergence at the time of the Vietnam War when the belief was widespread that the United States was in retreat from Asia as well as weakened by the long war in Southeast Asia. Then too, the alliance structure in Northeast Asia was challenged by China, which crossed the nuclear threshold in the mid-1960s, and by an aggressive North Korea.

The stability and security provided by the alliance architecture in Northeast Asia is now threatened by this growing sense of strategic abandonment. We define strategic abandonment as the fear of abandonment combined with a sense of separation of strategic interests. In Korea, the sense of abandonment has been driven in recent years by policies that appear to downgrade the relevance of the alliance to the security of the country. But even in Japan, where there is less questioning of the validity of the alliance, there are also growing feelings of separation between Japan and the United States.

Strategic abandonment leads directly to uncertainty and instability—uncertainty about how the United States might respond to security threats and instability as rising powers and other actors challenge the current balance of power. At the extreme end, strategic abandonment can lead—as it did in the Vietnam War era—to nuclear proliferation on the part of U.S. allies who no longer feel secure about the guarantees of extended deterrence.

Strategic abandonment is a problem with a built-in cure, provided that all the partners in the alliance system still desire the stability and security that system provided. It requires concerted efforts at consultation and the formation of common policy at the diplomatic, political, and military levels of the alliances. There has been a curious absence of that kind of consultation, particularly in the ROK-U.S. alliance but also with Japan and at the level of trilateral coordination among the ROK, Japan, and the United States. Such consultations could include:

- A thorough reexamination of the timetable for command transfer in Korea, including linking that timetable more clearly to a joint study of the military and political conditions on the peninsula. This does not mean that the goal of transfer needs to be reversed—only that we should have the strategic discussion that should have accompanied that decision;
- Discussions at a high level held by the United States with both the ROK and

Japan about the policy of extended deterrence. What are the expectations of our allies; under what circumstances would deterrent forces be used; what are the options, both conventional and nuclear, that might be employed to provide extended deterrence; and what other measures, including the transfer of advanced defense technology, would aid deterrence; and

- A senior-level strategic dialogue among the United States, the ROK, and Japan, held with the goal of exchanging views on the global and regional situation, problems of common interest, and areas of trilateral cooperation, including on issues such as alternative energy development and development assistance.

During the next year, leadership will change in the United States and in the ROK, and perhaps in Japan as well. Whatever the outcome of the political process, this will create a moment to counter the drift toward strategic abandonment. We should not miss that opportunity.

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