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# The China factor in the US–South Korea alliance: the perceived usefulness of China in the Korean Peninsula<sup>1</sup>

HYON JOO YOO\*

*Over the past 10 years, South Korea has chosen inconsistent strategies with respect to the US–South Korea alliance. On the one hand, Seoul disagreed with Washington about the extended role of United States Forces Korea and the deployment of US missile defence systems in East Asia. On the other hand, these problems ironically coincided with South Korea’s strong support for the USA in operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. What explains the inconsistency of South Korea’s alliance policies? Major schools of thought in international relations have offered explanations, but their analyses are deficient and indeterminate. This article looks at the South Korea–China–North Korea triangle as a new approach to explaining the puzzling behaviour of South Korea. The model shows that South Korea’s alliance policies are driven by two causal variables. First, North Korea is an impelling force for South Korea to remain as a strong US alliance partner. This encourages Seoul to maintain cooperation with Washington in wide-ranging alliance tasks. Second, South Korea’s policies are likely to reflect the way the nation perceives how useful China is in taming North Korea. The perceived usefulness of China causes Seoul to accommodate China and decrease cooperation with the USA. This might strain the relationship with the USA should South Korea evade alliance missions that might run contrary to China’s security interests.*

**Keywords:** China; missile defence; North Korea; strategic flexibility; US–South Korea alliance

## Introduction

Over the past 10 years, the US–South Korea alliance has gone through a profound transformation. While the strategic utility of this security relationship is the deterrence of North Korea, it has been redesigned to confront regional problems and global challenges. During this period, the modification of the alliance has resulted in tension between the two allies due, in part, to inconsistent and even contradictory policy choices employed by South Korea.

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\*Hyon Joo Yoo is an Assistant Professor of the Department of Political Science at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, USA. <[hyonjooyoo@gmail.com](mailto:hyonjooyoo@gmail.com)>; <[hyoo@trinity.edu](mailto:hyoo@trinity.edu)>

On the one hand, Seoul disagreed with Washington over the extended role of United States Forces Korea (USFK) and the deployment of US missile defence (MD) systems in East Asia. In the end, South Korea reluctantly and partially accommodated the USA, but the two partners still hold divergent views on the necessity of the US-led MD programs and the feasibility of USFK's operations outside the Korean Peninsula. On the other hand, these problems ironically coincided with South Korea's strong economic and military support for the US operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Moreover, the Seoul government constantly stressed the importance of the alliance and gave unequivocal commitment to strengthening bilateral relations with the USA. What explains the inconsistency of South Korea's alliance policies? Major schools of thought in international relations offer incomplete and indeterminate explanations for this phenomenon.

This article employs the South Korea–China–North Korea triangle as a new approach to explaining the puzzling behaviour of South Korea. This model shows that South Korea's alliance policies are driven by two causal variables. First, North Korea works as an impelling force to make South Korea a supportive alliance partner for the USA. As policy elites in both Seoul and Washington agree, the alliance has addressed important security problems regarding North Korea's nuclear threats, other types of weapons of mass destruction, and military adventurism driven by the belief that offensive manoeuvres will pay off. Second, South Korea's policies also reflect the way the nation perceives how useful China is in taming North Korea. Seoul seems to believe that Beijing would be able to curtail Pyongyang's aggressive behaviour by withholding economic assistance and political support.

In other words, while the threat of North Korea encourages Seoul to maintain cooperation with Washington in wide-ranging alliance tasks, the perceived usefulness of China in handling North Korea causes South Korea to decrease cooperation with the USA with respect to some regional security problems. More specifically, with the perceived usefulness of China, South Korea will choose to accommodate China. This might strain the relationship with the USA should South Korea evade alliance missions that might run contrary to China's security interests. However, the existing North Korean threat will simultaneously compel the Seoul government to maintain strong support for the USA in alliance missions that do not directly concern China. Conversely, when Beijing is perceived to be ineffective in precluding Pyongyang's aggression, South Korea increases cooperation with the USA, even in the areas that might cause problems with China. Such action by Seoul will strengthen security relations with Washington while creating tension with the government in Beijing.

The article begins by addressing why previous analyses are deficient and indeterminate in explaining South Korea's inconsistent alliance policy options. Second, it offers a new approach based on dyad threats that explains the bilateral relationship between China and North Korea, and examines Seoul's perception about the usefulness of China. In the following section, the new theoretical approach is applied to understanding South Korea's alliance policies

in the past 10 years. Finally, the article concludes with a summary and discusses two policy implications.

### **The puzzle**

What explains South Korea's inconsistent alliance policies? More specifically, why did the South Korean government provide troops to the US operations in Afghanistan and Iraq while being reluctant to cooperate with the USA with regard to the MD programs and USFK's strategic flexibility? Many scholars in international relations have offered explanations for the recent developments in the US–South Korea alliance, but they have failed to provide sufficient analyses. Realist schools of thought, which put emphasis on the balance of power, stress that the relative economic and military strength of South Korea, compared to financially stricken and internationally isolated North Korea, obviates the need for a strong US–South Korea alliance (Suh 2007). Since the 1950s, when the alliance was formed, South Korea has successfully transformed from a war-torn pariah to a key player on the world stage, with the fifteenth largest economy and a strong military force. For this reason, Seoul's security policies these days are increasingly seeking independence from the alliance, such as the refusal to join the US MD programs. Nevertheless, while the balance of power explains a general direction of decreasing cooperation between South Korea and the USA, it is indeterminate why cooperation also exists in helping US forces in the Middle East and Central Asia. In other words, if the importance of the alliance is decreasing, why does South Korea bear a costly burden in alliance missions that are not relevant to the Korean Peninsula?

The balance of power theory also predicts that China's rising weight in the Peninsula may generate friction between Washington and Seoul as South Korea resists some regional security tasks in order to avoid confrontation with China. China has surpassed the USA as South Korea's number-one trading partner since 2004, and historical and cultural ties have offered more ground for Seoul to work with Beijing than Washington. Hence, scholars have argued that the changing balance of power in East Asia with China's ascendance will cause Seoul's strategic tilt towards Beijing and the decline of the US–South Korea alliance (Cha 2004; Chung 2001; Ross 2006). However, this analysis is overdetermined. While China's increasing power compels South Korea to employ pro-China policies, the balance of power logic simultaneously pushes the nation in an opposite direction to increased cooperation with the USA so as to balance potential threats emanating from China (Mearsheimer 2001). Accordingly, the power-driven theory does not indicate to what extent and under what conditions South Korea would choose China as opposed to the USA, and vice versa.

Liberal pluralism, which acknowledges the diversity of domestic politics, shows that South Korea's alliance policies are inconsistent because various perspectives exist in South Korean society. On the one hand, there is a group of

people—liberal and progressive—who do not perceive North Korea as a major enemy. They believe that the cold war-style competition and confrontation with North Korea are no longer necessary, and champion flexible approaches to North Korea. The rampant anti-US sentiment that has existed along with this view has also caused fraying relations between South Korea and the USA. On the other hand, there is a group of people who ardently support cooperation with the USA. They still believe that the USA is the best foreign policy partner and that the alliance is crucial to Seoul's national security (Bouton et al. 2004; East Asia Institute 2011; *Hankuk Ilbo* 2006). Nevertheless, the theoretical approach to domestic politics is not without problems. First, it overlooks the fact that liberal and progressive elites, such as Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, stressed the importance of the alliance to deter North Korea, even when they were seeking the Sunshine Policy—an engagement policy towards Pyongyang. Second, President Roh, who was elected with the growing anti-US sentiment in South Korea, provided strong support for US operations abroad, despite his unyielding stand towards the alliance and pro-North Korea approach.

A constructivist view offers an explanation for the existence and sources of tension in the US–South Korea alliance by relying on the dissimilar national identities and public views of South Korea and the USA (Shin 2010). However, it is limited in explicating why South Korea has simultaneously chosen cooperative and uncooperative policies towards the USA, even though the fact that people in South Korea and the USA have dissimilar identities remains unchanged. What, then, explains this inconsistency in South Korea's alliance policies?

### The perceived usefulness of China

This article looks at the South Korea–China–North Korea triangle as a new approach to explaining the puzzling behaviour of South Korea with respect to the alliance. In this triangle, South Korea is a primary state that perceives its dyad threats—the alliance relations between China and North Korea. For more than 60 years, Beijing has been an important alliance partner for Pyongyang, which poses conventional and nuclear threats to the Seoul government (see Ministry of National Defense 2006). Although the cohesion of the Chinese–North Korean alignment loosened after the end of the cold war, China maintains an important diplomatic and economic relationship with North Korea for strategic reasons (Han 2004; Scobell 2004; Wu 2005). According to Chinese data, China constitutes nearly 50 percent of the total foreign trade of North Korea, and that portion is reportedly increasing (Li 2006). In 2008, China became North Korea's biggest trading partner, with the volume of their bilateral trade reaching US\$2.7 billion (Aden 2011; Nanto and Manyin 2010). Scholars have noted that despite constant famine and a slow-growing economy,

Pyongyang has not collapsed because China has supplied essential energy and food (Choo 2008; Noland 1997).

China is likely to continue its strategic partnership with North Korea because consistent financial support gives Beijing an opportunity to exercise influence over Pyongyang. As Samuel Kim and Tai-hwan Lee (2002, 132) have noted: ‘Since any weakening influence over North Korea would degrade [its] strategic status in the Korean Peninsula, as well as in Asia, China will invest necessary capital in North Korea in order to maximize [its] influence over the Korean affairs’. This explains why the Beijing government has rejected US proposals in the past to reduce economic exchanges with North Korea—a means to facilitate the dismantling of nuclear programs (Liu 2003; Shen 2009).

#### *Alliance restraints within dyad threats*

The new model deals with a triangle that is composed of a primary state and its dyad threats (a pair of external threats that forge a security coalition). In the study of international relations, while scholars have explored alliance dynamics, they have ignored how such interactions between alliance partners are perceived by an outside state. In fact, as the alliance literature shows, the relationship between members of dyad threats exhibits alliance politics (Snyder 1997). Specifically, members within dyad threats may have dissimilar views regarding how to approach an outside state. One may disagree with the other when an aggressive member seeks confrontation or wages war against the outside state. For instance, while Austria-Hungary and Germany constituted dyad threats for Russia in 1879, they had different approaches towards Russia. Austria-Hungary was in constant competition with Russia over the Balkans, while Germany was reluctant to get involved.

This disagreement within dyad threats will cause friction if one member tries to restrain the other. As scholars have explored, alliance partners can preclude each other from undertaking provocative activities (Weitsman 2004). In particular, the success of restraint hinges in part on who has more material capability (Pressman 2008). Large powers are more likely to succeed in exerting restraint over small powers in an asymmetric alliance since the latter relies more on the former in terms of defence posture and offensive strategies. This is possible because the larger power will threaten the aggressive partner with leaving the alliance or withholding material assistance (Snyder 1997).

In this light, the restraining capability of one member (Y) within dyad threats is significant to the outside state. If the outside state believes that Y is useful in restraining the aggressive member (X), the state will choose to accommodate Y. This may cause the primary state to decrease the commitment to its own alliance partner. Simultaneously, the primary state may choose a competitive strategy against X, the aggressive member within dyad threats. Conversely, if Y is not useful in restraining the aggressive member, the primary state does not have to

differentiate between dyad threats and employ a competitive strategy toward both of them. (see Figure 1).

*China is useful*

According to the new model, South Korea, as a primary state, perceives how useful China is in restraining North Korea. South Korea’s view is that as long as the strategic partnership between China and North Korea continues to exist, China will play an important role in preserving the stability of the Korean Peninsula (see Cha 1999; Lee 1996; Moon 1998; Shambaugh 2004–05). Seoul’s perception is embedded in the belief that China can be useful in communicating with North Korea and alleviating tension in the Korean Peninsula. This type of view has become evident particularly since North Korean provocation. When Pyongyang detonated nuclear devices in 2009, President Lee Myung-bak stated that China would be a significant player in a diplomatic effort to terminate North Korea’s nuclear programs (*Seoul Shinmun* 2009). The former president, Kim Dae-jung, immediately called on China to act as a moderator to reduce tension between the two Koreas (*Hangyoreh* 2009). South Korean defence White Papers have also recognised China’s positive role. They have acknowledged the fact that China has reduced arms sales to North Korea since the mid 1980s and precluded North Korea from waging a second Korean war (Ministry of National Defense 1988, 57–58). While Beijing’s restraining capability was in question, China froze the energy supply to North Korea in a short period of time and collaborated with the USA in restricting North Korea’s bank account in the Banco Delta Asia in 2006. Such Chinese actions temporarily stopped Pyongyang’s audacious behaviour and brought North Korea back to the six-party talks.

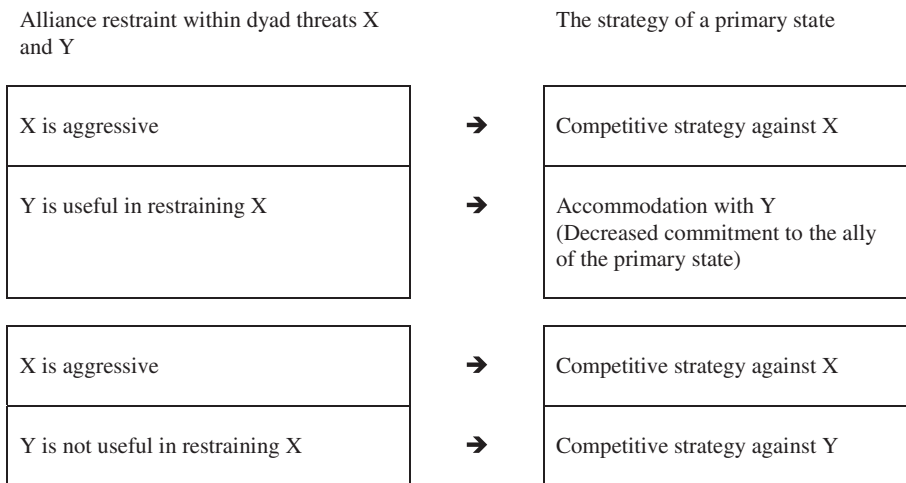


Figure 1. The strategy of a primary state.

*China is not that useful*

However, as some pundits and scholars have argued, China's influence on North Korea seems limited (Ji 2001; Scobell 2004; Snyder 2006). China is unwilling to stop supplying food and energy to North Korea because punishing Pyongyang would cause even more reckless behaviour. This concern surfaced with China's reaction to the sinking of the South Korean corvette *Cheonan*, killing 46 servicemen, near the sea border between the two Koreas in March 2010. The international investigation led by the Seoul government revealed that a torpedo fired by a North Korean submarine was the cause of the explosion. The international community, including the USA, Japan and the European Union, publicly condemned North Korea, while China was extremely cautious. The Chinese government even questioned the result of this investigation and declined to participate in South Korea's effort in the United Nations to blame North Korea (Segye Ilbo 2010). To South Korea's disappointment, China met with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-il without informing the South Korean president, who had visited Beijing just a few days earlier to discuss the *Cheonan* case (Gyeonghyang Shinmun 2010). For many South Koreans, China's response was 'wilful blindness' towards North Korea's provocation (Korea Times 2010). And it frustrated Seoul's desire to punish North Korea for destroying peace in the Peninsula (Hankuk Ilbo 2010).

Moreover, the Chinese government, along with North Korea, encouraged Seoul to move on and proposed that six-party talks begin as soon as possible, regardless of the *Cheonan* incident. However, the South Korean government wanted to identify who had caused the crisis and receive a proper apology from North Korea before the six parties resumed multilateral talks.

Neither Beijing's neutrality nor the policy of equidistance between Seoul and Pyongyang was enough to satisfy South Korea. It started to question China's intentions and increasingly believed that China might no longer be useful. The following section reveals the change in South Korea's alliance policies as the country has perceived the usefulness of China dissipating in the past few years, especially since 2010. It contrasts with earlier years, when China was perceived as useful.

**South Korea's inconsistent strategies, 2000–9**

From 2000 to 2009, Pyongyang's sporadic ballistic missile tests, nuclear detonations and naval skirmishes exacerbated tension in the Korean Peninsula. The more provocative North Korea became, the more useful China became in defusing tension in the Peninsula. Seoul attempted to avoid confrontation with China, even if such action might have looked like intransigence to the USA. However, the nation also made strong commitments to the USA because of the North Korean threat. This gave rise to inconsistent alliance strategies in South Korea.



*Confrontation with the USA: MD policy*

Seoul evinced no interest in the USA's MD programs, even after Washington had made constant requests. One major reason may be found in official comments made by Korean leaders that South Korea did not want to provoke China (*Chosun Ilbo* 2001). According to President Roh, the US anti-missile architecture would reinstate the cold war competition between the USA, Japan and China.<sup>2</sup> As one Korean scholar has also noted, it was not beneficial for South Korea to participate in the US systems because such action would instigate military confrontation in East Asia and deprive Seoul of an opportunity to promote friendly relations with Beijing (Hong 2004, 91). South Korea understood China's apprehension that the US MD programs would neutralise China's deterrence capability. Seoul also feared the worst-case scenario, in which Beijing would develop technologies to get round the US systems (Kim 2004). A recent development reveals that China has been enhancing the speed and mobility of existing missiles, while developing solid-propellant missiles in order to beat the USA's anti-missile shield. China has also successfully tested intermediate-range missiles with multiple dummy warheads that could distract the warning system of the MD programs (Tompkins 2003).

Instead of joining the regional MD systems, the Seoul government decided to advance its indigenous programs to monitor North Korea's short-range missiles around the clock without assistance from the USA. The focus of South Korea's self-reliant systems has been placed deliberately on lower-tier systems that are designed to protect the major cities and coastal areas of South Korea, rather than upper-tier systems that would intercept long-range ballistic missiles which would target beyond the Korean Peninsula. According to some experts, technologies in the Korean Air and Missile Defence (KAMD) can track an object 1000 kilometres away, such as missile sites in North Korea, but are not useful for detecting the long-range ballistic missiles that are deployed in the Jilin and Liaoning provinces of China.

Nevertheless, China might have believed that the KAMD programs could be merged into the regional MD structure, since South Korea needs to cooperate with USFK to collect information and operate its anti-missile programs more effectively. As some scholars have pointed out, cooperation with the USA is essential for South Korea in order to improve protection of its territory from ground to space (Jeon 2000; Park 2008). USFK has X-band radars and the Defence Support Program—the key elements of US MD—to detect the speed and trajectory of North Korea's ballistic missiles more precisely. Furthermore, South Korea purchased US MD technologies that render its systems interoperable with the US command.

However, South Korea clarified that the KAMD programs differ from the regional US MD systems. When purchasing US Patriot advanced capability (PAC) for missile interceptors, the Seoul government stressed that the

procurement was not designed to tap into the US programs. According to some military experts, the PAC-2 missiles that South Korea chose are not sufficient to work with the US programs, which, in fact, require PAC-3—an upgraded version of PAC-2. While PAC-2 is not intended to destroy ballistic missiles, but to target slow-flying airplanes, the PAC-3 missiles that Washington recommended to Seoul are key elements for the operation of upper-tier systems in the regional anti-missile programs. South Korea is now considering the procurement of long-range ship-to-air missiles, such as Standard Missile 6, for the Aegis system, because the range of the current Standard Missile 2 is too short. Again, South Korea has stressed that such procurement is for enhancing indigenous programs and has expressed no interest in joining the USA’s MD systems (*Yonhap News* 2008; see Table 1).

Table 1. South Korea’s MD programs and the requirements of the US-led MD systems

Architecture class	South Korea’s military procurement	US requirements
Land-based upper tier	Not applicable	Theatre High Altitude Area Defence
Land-based lower tier	Airborne Early Warning and Control System Air and Missile Defence Cell PAC-2 and KM-Surface to Air Missile  • <i>Will protect Seoul and its vicinity</i>	Theatre High Altitude Area Defence PAC-3 with remote launchers at most sites to extend their coverage
Sea-based upper tier	Not applicable	Aegis SPY-1 Radar Navy Theater Wide Standard Missile-3 (to destroy ballistic missiles)  • <i>Cannot defend the northern two-thirds of South Korea against low-flying short-range ballistic missiles</i>
Sea-based lower tier	Aegis Korean Destroyer Experimental Program-IIIs SPY1D (radar to detect ballistic missiles within 1000 kilometres) SM-2 (to destroy aircraft and cruise missiles and probably ballistic missiles)  • <i>Cannot defend critical assets and population centres inland</i>	Similar to the navy’s defence system

Sources: Hwang (2008) and US Department of Defense (1999).

*Confrontation with the USA: the flexible use of USFK*

Another political confrontation between the USA and South Korea arose when the former initiated a comprehensive strategic transformation of its military forces, and the latter reluctantly and partially accepted such a change. The US Quadrennial Defence Review in 2001 and the Global Posture Review in 2004 called for improved military capability by reducing the number of US ground troops overseas and reinforcing air and naval forces with advanced technology (US Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services 2004; US Department of Defense 2001). In line with the Global Posture Review, the realignment of USFK took place in order to meet future regional contingencies beyond the Korean Peninsula, such as possible clashes between regional powers over the Taiwan Strait. The reform of US alliance strategies in East Asia renders flexibility to US forces to effectively tackle diversified regional security challenges. Along with the shift of US military strategy, the Japanese government adjusted its foreign policy. The two alliance partners recognised the security of Taiwan as a common strategic objective. Expectedly, the Chinese government denounced Japan and the USA for interfering with its internal affairs and infringing the sovereignty of China.

Vigilant with regard to China's response, the South Korean government did not grant explicit consent for the expansion of the strategic flexibility of USFK. President Roh noted that:

South Korea would not allow US troops to get involved in any disputes in Northeast Asia without the consent of the South Korean government. 'I can clearly say that our people will not get entangled in regional disputes against our will in the future' (*Korea Times* 2005a).

A few months later, President Roh confirmed this view during his meeting with President Bush in June 2005. The South Korean Labor Party, Roh's political base, espoused this position, stating that an expanded role of USFK would not only exacerbate military tension in North-East Asia, but would also have a negative influence on the North Korean nuclear issue (*Korea Times* 2005b). People in the Labor Party understood that China was vehemently opposed to the change of USFK, which would encircle China, and if South Korea accepted this change, the government might have to forgo getting help from Beijing in handling nuclear problems in North Korea.

South Korea's reluctance was regarded as oversensitivity towards China, but it was not an imprudent action. The Chinese government was believed to have multiple communication channels to induce North Korea to engage in multilateral discussions. For instance, China organised a preliminary trilateral talk with the USA and North Korea in April 2003—the prototype of the current six-party talks—after more than 50 attempts to contact the government of Pyongyang (Park 2003). China also provided a venue for multilateral dialogues and transmitted North Korea's opinion to the USA and South Korea to facilitate

communication. Importantly, China's special position in enjoying formal diplomatic relations with both North and South Korea raised the hope in South Korea that China would work as an impartial mediator between the two Koreas, and perhaps choose a position in favour of South Korea (see *Global Times* 2010a).

Washington and Seoul convened annual security consultative meetings and security policy initiative meetings (major taskforces to discuss the Global Posture Review) to settle the disagreement, but they failed to reach a consensus. Some South Korean experts warned that South Korea's lack of support for the US plan would destroy the alliance (Park 2011). An increasing number of US policy makers also voiced complaints, for South Korea was no longer a reliable alliance partner and its strategic value to the USA was declining considerably (Heo and Kwon 2005). Although South Korea finally ratified the reorganisation of USFK after three years of debates, the agreement contained one important condition which reflected South Korea's firm position: that South Korea would remain uninvolved in any regional conflicts against the will of the Korean people. This makes South Korea's commitment of cooperation vague, and it remains debatable whether the country will be involved in regional conflicts or not.<sup>3</sup> The director general of the North American Bureau at the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that: 'South Korea and the United States intentionally left the agreement at a broad level without setting rules or guidelines. We will be discussing details as situations arise' (*Korea Times* 2006).

China responded relatively calmly after the agreement between the USA and South Korea was announced. However, an official remark made by Ning Fukui, Chinese ambassador to Seoul, attracted South Korea's attention. Ning stated that China would expect USFK to work within the structure of the US–South Korea bilateral alliance, but it could not be disinterested if US forces were to get involved in a third country's problems outside the Korean Peninsula.<sup>4</sup> South Korea interpreted his comment as a warning (*Chosun Ilbo* 2006).

### *Strong cooperation with the USA in Iraq and Afghanistan*

Ironically, a growing alienation between South Korea and the USA came in tandem with Seoul's cooperative policy with respect to other alliance missions. The South Korean government provided strong support for the US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Korean leaders justified such actions, noting that the precarious situation caused by North Korea necessitated a strong alliance with the USA.

President Roh, a progressive and liberal leader, decided to offer military assistance for the Iraq War, despite strong public opposition. In March 2003, only a few months after Roh took office, South Korea dispatched more than 600 non-combat troops, including military medics and engineers. Only six months after the first troops were dispatched, the Seoul government received another request from the USA to send more troops to Iraq, this time including

combat forces. A public opinion survey demonstrated that the majority of the population was against sending additional combatants because the US operation was without the authorisation of the United Nations (*Joonang Ilbo* 2003). Even liberal elites, Roh's political base, declared that they would launch a campaign against the president to keep him from deploying troops. Despite public opposition and political squabbling, the Roh government decided to deploy 3000 additional troops, but for non-combat operations. Roh's decision was sensational because many policy elites in Washington and Seoul observed that the president had made unfavourable remarks about the alliance and created trouble with the USA during the negotiations over the transformation of USFK. This made South Korea the third-largest contributor to the US-led military coalition in Iraq. For a number of years, approximately 3600 troops were dispatched by South Korea for operation Iraqi Freedom. It gradually decreased troop levels to 2300 by the end of 2006 and 1200 in mid 2007.

Roh noted that the dispatch of South Korean forces to Iraq was designed to reinforce the alliance. He stated that:

When considering the deployment of forces in Iraq, I believed that [the] peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula was significant. In the situation where the North Korean nuclear crisis could deteriorate at any moment, I believed that preserving a strong coalition with the United States was essential.<sup>5</sup>

The security advisor Lee Jong-seok (2003) made a similar point, claiming that increasing threats from North Korea were the most influential factor in the decision to send troops to Iraq. Although a complete withdrawal of South Korean forces from Iraq was scheduled for the end of 2007, Roh modified the original plan a few months before the end of his presidency and extended the date of a complete withdrawal to the end of 2008. This decision came right after North Korea had conducted its large missile tests and nuclear detonation in 2006. Justifying the extension, the South Korean president stressed once again that cooperation with the USA was essential. He noted that without the help of the USA, South Korea would not be able to enjoy a peaceful atmosphere in the Peninsula.

Irrespective of their political orientations, both liberal and conservative South Korean leaders have showed similar patterns in supporting US military plans outside North-East Asia. Former president Kim Dae-jung, another liberal leader, provided non-combat forces to Afghanistan in response to a US request. Non-combat troops, including medics and engineers, were deployed to Afghanistan in 2002 and came back to South Korea at the end of 2007 after almost six years of service. Like his two predecessors, the current president, Lee Myung-bak, a conservative leader, has faced similar pressures. During the 2008 summit, Washington asked Seoul for non-combatant assistance to Afghanistan and, a year later, for the dispatch of troops. In May 2009, the South Korean government announced an aid package, including humanitarian and financial

assistance, with US\$19.5 million for job training and hospital construction. A few months later, South Korea sent additional civilian workers to Afghanistan and 320 troops to protect them. The first dispatch to Afghanistan was completed in June 2010.

According to President Kim, the dispatch of South Korean forces to Afghanistan was active participation in the US-led global War on Terror in order to reinforce the US–South Korea alliance.<sup>6</sup> The Lee government also made a similar remark that the primary purpose of supporting the USA lay in strengthening the alliance. One South Korean politician argued that such a choice would give the South Korean government leverage in obtaining more cooperation from the USA if a conflict occurred in the Peninsula.<sup>7</sup> During a potential military crisis in the Korean peninsula, the USA would play an important role, since US leadership could attract help from other countries, such as members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that the dispatch of South Korean troops will always reflect the North Korean threat. In essence, with respect to United Nations peacekeeping missions, the Seoul government has provided humanitarian assistance and even combatants to other regions, including Somalia, Angola and Lebanon. However, when it comes to a request from the USA, South Korea is mindful of the dynamic situation in the Korean Peninsula and, more specifically, of the role of the alliance in deterring North Korea. Particularly with regard to the situation where the North Korean government has developed nuclear programs, losing the alliance with the USA would lead to the prohibitive costs of defence for South Korea.

### **South Korea's increasing cooperation with the USA, 2010–11**

After the sinking of the South Korean patrol ship *Cheonan* in 2010, China's response was not what South Korea had expected. Although expressing its condolences, China was not in line with South Korea's effort to condemn North Korea. In November 2010, only eight months after the *Cheonan* incident, North Korea initiated intensive bombardment of the South Korean island of Yeonpyong in the Yellow Sea, killing two civilians and two servicemen. This incident came as a shock to the South Korean public, who were still suffering from the tragic *Cheonan* sinking. North Korea's artillery attack, which targeted marine bases and even civilian properties in Yeonpyong, was recorded as the worst provocation on South Korean territory since the Korean War in 1953. A public opinion survey conducted by the East Asia Institute reported that 81.5 percent of respondents in South Korea felt insecure after the incident (Lee and Jeong 2010).

South Korea immediately sought cooperation from regional powers, the USA, Japan and China. The USA condemned North Korea's actions without the slightest hesitation.<sup>8</sup> In July 2010, the two alliance partners had warned North Korea by conducting military exercises (Invincible Spirit) in the East Sea of

Korea, which included the aircraft carrier *George Washington*. The US-led Combined Forces Command had taken back control of the annual US–South Korea military exercise (Ulchi-Freedom Guardian), which had been led by the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff since 2008. South Korea and the USA had increased pressure on North Korea by having South Korean forces lead the Proliferation Strategic Initiative exercise (the first time for South Korea to do so). Pyongyang claimed that such military exercises were tantamount to war against North Korea. A few days after the Yeonpyong incident, US–South Korea joint military exercises took place again. This time, the US carrier *George Washington* went to the Yellow Sea, close to mainland China.

South Korea's neighbours had different opinions with regard to these exercises. Japan was in tune with South Korea's effort. Prime Minister Kan Naoto demanded that North Korea stop provocative actions immediately, while agreeing with the South Korean president to strengthen cooperation in the wake of the military skirmish between the two Koreas.<sup>9</sup> However, China was critical of South Korea's firm stance against North Korea. Unhappy with military exercises near its coastal waters, China registered an official protest against the USA and South Korea. It argued that Beijing would be within striking distance of the missiles which the USA and South Korea were planning to test during the military exercises. A South Korean spokesperson responded stiffly that military exercises with the USA were in the nation's interest and an independent decision made by the South Korean government regardless of China's opposition.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, China made another diplomatic protest against South Korea. Chinese leaders allowed Kim Jong-il to come to China in August 2010, only three months after his visit to Beijing. This increased suspicion among the South Korean people that the Sino-North Korean alliance had been revamped only after the series of provocative actions on the part of Pyongyang. Although Chinese leaders may have believed that they had been fair and neutral in dealing with the two Koreas, South Korea regarded China's action as support for the North Korean regime. Representing South Korea's expectations from China, President Lee Myung-bak requested that China make a fairer and more responsible gesture in inter-Korean relations during his conversation with China's state councillor, Dai Bing-guo. The stark difference between Seoul and Beijing in responding to North Korea's brazen behaviour began to create tension in the Sino-South Korean relationship. Chinese newspapers claimed that the US–South Korea alliance isolated North Korea even further, precluding the communist regime from entering the international community (*Global Times* 2010b).

### *Changes in the MD policy*

Having seen little evidence that China was restraining North Korea after the *Cheonan* incident, South Korea revealed a subtle change. The government began to speak publicly about cooperation with the USA over ballistic MD

systems. The South Korean defence minister, Kim Tae-young, announced that the nation was discussing various ways to cooperate with the USA. Later, the two countries signed an agreement to conduct joint research. Seoul even considered offering financial assistance to place the early warning radar of USFK's ballistic MD architecture in the Peninsula. Some experts have argued that such a change in South Korea had been expected from the beginning of the Lee administration, because Lee, as a conservative leader, had been trying to reinforce the alliance. In contrast to such an expectation, the Lee government, in fact, remained reluctant regarding the regional MD programs. Only after 2010 did South Korea exhibit a subtle change by going public about its technological collaboration with the USA. Although some people argued that cooperation between Washington and Seoul would be limited only to lower-tier MD systems and mostly target North Korea's ballistic missiles, a recent news document revealed that the two alliance partners have discussed broadening the range of KAMD to cover not only the Korean Peninsula, but also Okinawa and Guam (*Shindonga* 2011). Such a move would require South Korea to introduce upper-tier systems, which the country has so far avoided, in developing its air and missile defence.

## Conclusion

In the context of the South Korea–China–North Korea triangle, this article has offered explanations for South Korea's alliance strategies, which rely on both the North Korean threat and the China factor. Specifically, the constant North Korean threat and the perceived usefulness of China have led to bifurcated alliance strategies in South Korea. The perceived usefulness of China has caused Seoul's intransigence with respect to US MD systems and the strategic transformation of USFK—issues that are relevant to China's security concern. In the meantime, the constant North Korean threat has caused South Korea to lend four-square support to the USA over non-regional issues in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, as China proved to be ineffective after the military crises in 2010, South Korea leaned more on the USA. Seoul conducted joint military exercises with Washington in response to Pyongyang's provocation, promoting the spirit of alliance with the USA, despite China's strong opposition. As a result, the bilateral relations between South Korea and China were strained after they exchanged acerbic criticism of each other's actions. Moreover, South Korea publicised possible cooperation with the USA over anti-missile technologies (see [Table 2](#)).

The perceived usefulness of China offers more complete explanations than major schools of thought in international relations. First, in contrast to the balance of power argument that mainly predicts a gradual decrease in alliance cooperation, this article explains why South Korea has taken on costly burdens with regard to some alliance missions and why cooperation has taken place outside the East Asia region. It also offers a better explanation for why



cooperation with the USA has increased, particularly after 2010, although the logic of the balance of power argument predicts the opposite. Second, the new model works better than analysis based on domestic politics in explaining under what conditions South Korea would choose cooperation over intransigence vis-à-vis the USA, and why a liberal, progressive leader, who was expected to resist US requests, chose to accommodate his US partner. Third, this article gives a better explanation than the identity-based argument for why the inconsistency of Seoul's policies exists, when dissimilar identities in South Korea and the USA would only account for friction between the two alliance partners.

This article suggests that there are at least two policy implications. First, for the USA, the course of South Korea's actions discussed in this article suggests that the USA will continue to gain support from South Korea as long as North Korea is perceived to be a critical threat. In particular, it would be relatively easy for Washington to receive assistance from Seoul if military operations take place in the Middle East and Africa. However, because of the perceived usefulness of China in alleviating tension in the Peninsula, the USA would not receive strong support from Seoul with regard to alliance tasks that attempt to contain China. Even so, this does not necessarily mean that South Korea would improve its bilateral relationship with China at the expense of the alliance. Rather, it is the result of South Korea's strategic dilemma in pursuing a strong alliance with Washington whilst, simultaneously, maintaining economic and political ties with Beijing.

Second, for the Chinese government, the sinking of the *Cheonan* has demonstrated that China could encounter some problems in its relations with the two Koreas. Although China has taken a neutral position between North and South Korea, it will confront difficulties maintaining equidistance in the future as deepening Sino-South Korea relations increase South Korea's expectations from China. The closer Sino-South Korea relations become, the more South Korea will expect from China. Then, Seoul might even attempt to win over Beijing against Pyongyang. China's failure to anticipate such changed expectations would drive South Korea to the US side even further—a picture that would not be so pleasant to Beijing. This implies that China's bilateral relations with both North and South Korea not only create a strategic advantage, but will also burden the Chinese government if they are not well managed.

Table 2. South Korea's alliance strategies

The perceived usefulness of China		
	China is perceived to be useful	China is perceived to be useless
The North Korean threat	South Korea's inconsistent strategies, 2000–9 (coexistence of cooperation and friction with the USA)	South Korea's cooperative strategies, 2010–11 (increased cooperation with the USA)

Ironically, this appears to be advantageous for the USA. In contrast to Washington's concerns, growing interactions between China and South Korea would not always inflict damage on the US–South Korea alliance, but could make the alliance even stronger in some instances.

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2. Roh Moo-hyun's address at the Hangyoreh-Busan International Symposium, Busan, November 13, 2007.
3. Interview by the author with a government official in the Ministry of National Defence, Seoul, June 12, 2006.
4. Ning Fu-kui's comment at the Korean Defence Forum, March 22, 2006. [http://article.joins.com/news/article/article.asp?total\\_id=2239194](http://article.joins.com/news/article/article.asp?total_id=2239194).
5. Roh Moo-hyun's public speech regarding the additional deployment of the Zaytun Division to Iraq, October 23, 2007. <http://news.donga.com/3/all/20071023/8503381/1>.
6. Kim Dae-jung's special address, October 8, 2001.
7. Kim Hee-sang's comment on the dispatch of forces to Afghanistan, December 23, 2009. <http://news.donga.com/3/all/20091223/24991283/1>.
8. Hillary Clinton's comment, May 21, 2010. [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/22/world/asia/22diplo.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/22/world/asia/22diplo.html?_r=0).
9. Kan Naoto's comment, Kyoto News Agency, November 24, 2010.
10. Kim Young-sun's briefing, July 8, 2010. [http://www.ytn.co.kr/\\_ln/0101\\_201007081449098529](http://www.ytn.co.kr/_ln/0101_201007081449098529).

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