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# U.S.-ROK Security Treaty: Another Half Century?

**Edward A. Olsen**

The next two years shall mark a watershed in U.S.-Korea security relations. In October of 2003 and November of 2004 the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) will observe the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of their Mutual Defense Treaty (October 1, 1953) and the date the treaty entered into force (November 17, 1954). Each shall formally represent a half century milestone in U.S.-ROK security relations. As a practical matter that strategic relationship obviously stretches further back in history. A modest case can be made for the beginning dating back to the U.S. military's occupation of liberated southern Korea after the defeat of Japan in World War Two. An early formal tie can be linked to the creation of the ROK via May 1948 United Nations-backed elections that yielded a U.S.-ROK state-to-state military relationship.<sup>1</sup> A profound bilateral security relationship dates from the 1950-53 Korean War time frame giving both allies strong memories sealed in blood.<sup>2</sup> Using any of these dates, the United States and South Korea already have surpassed the half century mark in their bilateral security relationship. Nonetheless, the upcoming anniversary

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1 For insights into the military dynamics of those periods, see: E. Grant Meade, *American Military Government in Korea*, (New York: Kings Crown Press, 1951), and Robert K. Sawyer, *Military Advisors in Korea: KMAG in War and Peace*, (Washington, DC: Department of Army, Office of Military History, 1962).

2 For senior American and South Korean generals' perspectives on that war and its legacy, see: Mathew B. Ridgway, *The Korean War*, (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1967), J. Lawton Collins, *War In Peacetime, The History and Lessons of Korea*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969), and Paik Sun-yup, *From Pusan To Panmunjom*, (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1992).

dates for the formal Mutual Security Treaty undoubtedly and deservedly will be the focus of major bilateral attention.

The five decades of U.S.-ROK security relations have been the subject of countless press and academic articles and numerous books over the years. Undoubtedly the fiftieth anniversary of the treaty will be the occasion for additional historical studies. Although some of the scholarly attention to that historical legacy shall be drawn upon here, the focus of this analysis is the future and how planning for future conditions has been addressed within the alliance. As the title implies, it will explore the prospects for another half century -- examining both the likelihood and desirability of extending the alliance, based on the Mutual Security Treaty, to the full century mark with its anniversary in 2053-2054. It also will assess alternatives to a second fifty years of the same type alliance.

As important as the Mutual Security Treaty is to U.S.-ROK overall relations, and military-to-military ties, not many Americans or South Koreans are familiar with its text.<sup>3</sup> The text's specific provisions are rarely the subject of scholarly attention.<sup>4</sup> Nor do many Americans pay much attention to the ways in which the U.S. decision to participate in the Korean War, that led to the creation of the Mutual Security Treaty, was the focus of a heated debate among Americans about the most appropriate foreign and defense policies the United States should pursue - - and the consequent impact upon the U.S. role in the still young Cold War.<sup>5</sup> Virtually no attention is paid to the sparse nature of contemporary

3 It is available for perusal in: U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Treaties and Other International Agreements*, Vol. 5, Part 3, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1954), pp. 2368-2376.

4 For examples of critical insights into its provisions and limitations, see: Claude A. Buss, *The United States and The Republic of Korea, Background for Policy*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1982), Callum A. MacDonald, *Korea, The War Before Vietnam*, (New York: The Free Press, 1986), and Doug Bandow, *Tripwire, Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World*, (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 1996).

5 For important assessments of that impact, see: Rosemary A. Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict, 1950-1953*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), and Murray N. Rothbard, "The Foreign Policy of the Old Right," *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1978, pp. 85-96

U.S. media coverage of the treaty's signing or launching.<sup>6</sup> Having become 'entangled in the inter-Korean struggle as part of the formative phase of an expanding Cold War, the United States' stake in the results of that war became imbedded in U.S. policy. As important as the debate among policymakers and politicians had been at the war's outset, there was little popular attention paid to the reasons why the United States intensified its strategic commitments after the truce was achieved. These geopolitical obligations evolved from the altered Cold War context as though they were inevitable.

It is important to note the nuances of the setting in which the Mutual Security Treaty came into being. After the Korean Conflict's controversial truce was achieved through prolonged negotiations and signed on July 27, 1953,<sup>7</sup> the Syngman Rhee government was profoundly unhappy about this turn of events and did its utmost to derail the results of the process. The formal security treaty between the United States and South Korea was, in part, a device to reassure the Rhee government about the United States' continuing resolve on behalf of the ROK as well as means to restrain its ally's willingness to reignite the war.<sup>8</sup> It is also important to note the broader context of the 1953, post-Korean War, U.S.-

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6 For early scholarly coverage of the truce process and its aftermath. see: Leland M. Goodrich, *Korea, A Study of U.S. Policy in the United Nations*. (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1956). Kyung Cho Chung, *Korea Tomorrow, Land of the Morning Calm*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956). Carl Berger, *The Korea Knot, A Military-Political History*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957/1964). (revised edition); and William H. Vatcher, Jr., *Panmunjom: The Story of the Korean Military Armistice Negotiations*. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1958). For contemporary press coverage of the signing. see: anonymous, "Dulles Signs Pact With South Korea," *The New York Times*, October 2, 1953, p. 1, in which Secretary of States Dulles, after signing the treaty, said it is "another link in the collective security of the free nations of the Pacific."

7 For insights into U.S. involvement in that convoluted process, see: Rosemary Foot, *A Substitute for Victory: The Politics of Peacemaking at the Korean Armistice Talks*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

8 For historical analyses of that dynamic. see: Harold M. Vinacke, *A History of the Far East in Modern Times*. (New York: Appleton-Century-Croft, Inc., 1959), and Claude A. Buss, *Asia in The Modern World*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964).

ROK security treaty. In the preface portion of the treaty, prior to the specifics of Articles I-VI, both parties declared:

Desiring further to strengthen their efforts for collective defense for the preservation of peace and security pending the development of a more comprehensive and effective system of regional security in the Pacific area<sup>9</sup> (emphasis added)

This strongly indicates that this treaty was intended to be an interim arrangement. That larger objective was clear in the Eisenhower administration's efforts to build a lasting multilateral security network in Southeast Asia -- via the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) -- that did not succeed.<sup>10</sup> Had those sub-regional efforts succeeded, they likely would have been replicated throughout the other sub-regions of Asia -- including Northeast Asia -- and become the components of a pan-Asian regional security system analogous to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Obviously that never materialized, creating circumstances in which the United States assembled a hodgepodge of bilateral security and basing arrangements whose linkages were primarily through the U.S. nexus.<sup>11</sup>

These developments transformed the premises behind the U.S.-ROK Mutual Security Treaty, overshadowed its interim qualities, and made it part of an evolving theme in the Cold War. Instead of becoming a building block within a larger regional multilateral security structure, the U.S.-ROK alliance became one of a set of U.S. bilateral security relationships bolstering the U.S.-led cause in the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union utilized their respective networks of strategic

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9 U.S. Treaties, op. cit., p. 2371.

10 For assessments of that attempt and U.S. motives, see: Leszek Buszynski, *SEATO, The Failure of an Alliance Strategy*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983). Robert Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), and Richard A. Melanson and David Mayers, eds., *Reevaluating Eisenhower: American Foreign Policy in the 1950s*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

11 For an overall assessment of those strategic circumstances, see: Robert E. Harkavy, *Great Power Competition for Overseas Bases: The Geopolitics of Access Diplomacy*, (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982).

outposts for their global competition. In turn, those outposts were integrated into a form of strategic bilateral dependence by subordinate states rather than regional interdependence among partners. In terms of U.S.-ROK relations the post-Korean War bond was simultaneously far deeper than it had been prior to the war as well as far more of a client state affiliation. In short, there was an ambivalent level of intensity and expedience.

For present purposes what is most important about the initial events and their contextual setting is the assurance they provide in noting with confidence that there was no expectation as of 1953-54 that the arrangements put into place would remain intact for one hundred years. One can have almost the same level of confidence that most observers as of 1953-54 were not thinking in terms of the mutual treaty obligations persisting into the 21st century. Yet, events caused the security relationship to endure and in many respects flourish throughout the Cold War and into the early post-Cold War era. As the 21st century approached, many analysts during the last decade of the 20th century were optimistic that the U.S.-ROK security relationship would be perpetuated on a track that embodied basic continuity blended with innovative adaptations to changing circumstances.<sup>12</sup> Some analysts extended that perspective to include U.S. security ties with a reunified Korea.<sup>13</sup> Such views clearly represent the mainstream in both the United States and South Korea. Nonetheless, there has been a long term debate within the United States about both the desirable level of a U.S. security commitment to South Korea and about the criteria that would warrant modifying or terminating

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12 For significant examples, see: Jonathan D. Pollack and Cha Young-koo, *A New Alliance for the Next Century: The Future of U.S.-Korean Security Cooperation*, (Santa Monica: RAND, 1995), Kwak Tae-hwan and Thomas L. Wilborn, eds., *The U.S.-ROK Alliance in Transition*, (Seoul: IFES, Kyungnam University, 1996), and Ralph Cossa, *US-Korea-Japan Relations: Building Toward a "Virtual Alliance"*, (Washington, DC: CSIS, 1999).

13 See: Jonathan D. Pollack and Chung Min Lee, *Preparing for Korean Unification: Scenarios & Implications*, (Santa Monica: RAND, 1999), and Robert Dujarric, *Korean Unification and After: The Challenge for U.S. Strategy*, (Indianapolis: Hudson Institute, 2000).

that commitment.<sup>14</sup>

The upcoming commemoration of the anniversaries will provide a profound opportunity for all sides in the low key U.S. debate over “how much” and “how long” is appropriate for the future to reinvigorate their discussion. That debate also should be trans-Pacific in scope, between Americans and their South Korean counterparts within the alliance. Both parties should contemplate the future of their respective national interests in the alliance as well as the impact Korean national unification could have on their security policies.<sup>15</sup> There are a number of key issues that should be addressed as part of that evaluation. How important is the security relationship today? Will its importance grow or shrink? What factors will influence its importance? All of these shall be addressed here with the intent of helping to clarify the terms of the debate for both Americans and Koreans.

The importance attached to the U.S.-ROK Mutual Security Treaty has evolved in a dramatic fashion over the years. At the outset there was virtually nothing meaningful embodied by both sides' use of the word “mutual.” In terms of a South Korean commitment to defend U.S. territory, much less any U.S. need for such a commitment by the ROK, there was literally nothing “mutual” about the treaty. That is as true in 2002 as it was in 1953-54. On the other hand, acknowledging this controversial aspect of the treaty does not slight South Korea because the same observation applies to nearly all the United States' security arrangements with other countries. Notwithstanding claims to the

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14 For examples from both the liberal and conservative ends of the analytical spectrum, see: Earl C. Ravenal, “The Way Out of Korea,” *Inquiry*, December 5, 1977, pp. 15-18; Melvyn Krause, “It's Time for U.S. Troops to Leave Korea,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 24, 1987, p. 13; Doug Bandow, op. cit., and his “Korea. The Case for Disengagement,” *Policy Analysis*, No. 96, (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, December 8, 1987), Stephen Goose, “U.S. Forces in Korea: Assessing a Reduction” in Ted Galen Carpenter, ed., *Collective Defense or Strategic Independence? Alternative Strategies for the Future*, (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 1989), and Selig Harrison, “Time to Leave Korea?,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2001, pp. 62-79.

15 The author explores the latter theme in greater detail in his, *Toward Normalizing U.S.-Korea Relations; In Due Course?*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002).

contrary throughout the Cold War or during the current war on terrorism, the United States' perceived need for other countries to defend the United States ranges from negligible to non-existent.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, it does not diminish the ways in which a variety of countries -- including South Korea -- have been able to address the "mutual" facets of their security ties with the United States by helping the United States cope with threats to common interests not directly linked to U.S. homeland security.

Aside from the obvious utility of South Korea's strategic assistance in helping to stabilize Asia by coping with North Korea's capabilities throughout the Cold War and post-Cold War years, the ROK also lent a major military hand during the Vietnam War. South Korean force levels in Vietnam peaked at 50,000 and cumulatively almost 300,000 served under combat conditions with over 3,000 killed. This demonstrated Seoul's commitment to a broader brand of mutual security.<sup>17</sup> To be sure, South Korea also benefited from this effort in major ways by enhancing U.S. appreciation for the ROK as an ally, cultivating economic opportunities that bolstered South Korea at home and internationally, and influencing the United States' readiness to rearrange its priorities within Asia. On balance, therefore, as much as South Korea was traumatized by the United States' strategic setbacks in Indochina, and the resulting Vietnam syndrome's impact on American enthusiasm for existing U.S. strategic commitments, there is ample reason to perceive the U.S.-ROK security commitment's regional mutuality as becoming more thorough going as a result of experiencing this maturation process.

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16 The author explores that facet of U.S. grand strategy from a libertarian perspective in his, *U.S. National Defense for the 21st Century: The Grand Exit Strategy*. (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002).

17 For useful insights into South Korea's readiness to participate in that war and the consequences of doing so, see: Claude A. Buss, *The United States and the Republic of Korea*, op. cit., Han Sung-joo, "South Korea's Participation in the Vietnam Conflict: An Analysis of the U.S.-Korean Alliance," *Orbis*, Winter 1978, pp. 893-912; and George McT. Kahin, *Intervention, How America Became Involved in Vietnam*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986).



As the Cold War evolved during the Reagan years, South Korea played a steadfast role as a regional security partner for the United States.<sup>18</sup> South Korea reinforced that role through its efforts on the foreign policy front to diversify its economic and geopolitical interdependence. These steps were motivated by post-OPEC oil crisis economic desires to instill greater systemic support analogous to Japan's approach to "comprehensive security,"<sup>19</sup> by a desire to learn from West Germany's *ostpolitik* model through adaptation to Seoul's *nordpolitik* overtures to countries not in the U.S.-led camp of the Cold War, and by a readiness to experiment with a pre-Olympics brand of sports diplomacy designed to broaden South Korea's roles in the international community.<sup>20</sup> Despite all these efforts to diversify the ROK's network of contacts around the world, Seoul very clearly was intent upon preserving the foundation for its innovative external policies in the form of the bilateral U.S.-ROK mutual security alliance rooted in the Cold War. In short, as much as South Korea's policies effectively prepared it for the end of the Cold War, the ROK was not consciously planning for that end game any more than any other country whose security policies had been predicated on Cold War continuity.<sup>21</sup>

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18 For representative treatments of that era, see: Ralph N. Clough, *Embattled Korea: The Rivalry for International Support*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987) and James A. Gregor, *Land of the Morning Calm: Korea and American Security*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 1990). See, also, the author's *U.S. Policy and the Two Koreas*, (San Francisco & Boulder: World Affairs Council of Northern California & Westview Press, 1988).

19 The author explored that course of action in the 1980s and early '90s in his "Korean Security: Is Japan's 'Comprehensive Security' Model a Viable Alternative?" in Doug Bandow and Ted Galen Carpenter, eds., *The U.S.-South Korean Alliance, Time for a Change*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publisher, 1992).

20 For useful overviews of *nordpolitik* and sports diplomacy's role in inter-Korean and U.S.-Korean contexts, see: Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas, A Contemporary History*, (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1997).

21 For illustrative examples of late Cold War analyses that anticipated Cold War continuity as a context for future U.S.-ROK security relations, see: Harold C. Hinton, et. al., *The U.S.-Korean Security Relationship: Prospects and Challenges for the 1990s*, (Washington, DC: Pergamon Brassey's, 1988), and Manwoo Lee, et. al., *Alliance*

As a consequence, the end of the Cold War and collapse of the United States' main adversary was momentous for all of Korea. Obviously North Korea was far more traumatized by this turn of events than South Korea which was on the winning side and retained its ally intact, but Seoul also was compelled to adjust to the emerging post-Cold War security environment. The first decade of the post-Cold War era put South Korea in a somewhat ambivalent position. Because of the lingering remnant of the Cold War on the Korean peninsula, the U.S.-ROK security relationship exhibited a great deal of continuity that received considerable support from mainstream analysts, despite its anachronistic qualities.<sup>22</sup> Concurrent with that bilateral continuity, South Korea pursued various forms of multilateralist options to expand upon its track record of diversification.<sup>23</sup> Helping this ambivalence avoid the perception of being contradictory, South Korea's brand of experimental multilateralism was grounded on a foundation of U.S.-ROK bilateralism.<sup>24</sup> In these terms the U.S.-ROK alliance was widely deemed viable and the basis for continued cooperation well into the 21st century.<sup>25</sup>

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*Under Tension, The Evolution of South Korea-U.S. Relations.* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988).

22 For example, see: Young-whan Kihl, ed., *Korea and the World: Beyond the Cold War.* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994). Robert Dujarric, *Korea: Security Pivot in Northeast Asia.* (Indianapolis: Hudson Institute, 1998), and Tong-whan Park, ed., *The U.S. and the Two Koreas.* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 1998).

23 For concrete examples salient to the present topic, see: Victor Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: US-Korea-Japan Security Triangle.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), and Ralph Cossa, *US-Korea Japan Relations: Building Toward a "Virtual Alliance,"* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 1999). For a broader set of analyses linked to the current ROK government, see: *Democratization and Regional Cooperation in Asia.* (Seoul: Kim Dae-jung Peace Foundation, 1996).

24 For early post-Cold War assessments of that experiment, see: Lee Seo-hang, ed., *Evolving Multilateral Security Regime in Northeast Asia.* Seoul: Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, 1994.

25 For a thoughtful prescriptive analysis of those prospects, stemming from the U.S.-ROK Security Consultative Meeting process, see: Jonathan D. Pollack and Young Koo Cha, *A New Alliance For The Next Century, The Future of U.S.-Korean Security Cooperation.* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1995).

The launching of a new century and a new millennium combined to generate a sense of optimism with regard to continuity within the alliance. That was reinforced inadvertently by the events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath. Seoul's rhetorical and logistical support for the United States' efforts in the war on terrorism signaled South Korea's readiness to be perceived as an enthusiastic strategic partner for the United States.<sup>26</sup> President Bush's controversial inclusion of North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" undoubtedly provoked South Korean consternation in the Kim administration because of the ways it detracted from President Kim's "sunshine policy" agenda,<sup>27</sup> but it also served to underline the ways the U.S.-ROK mutual security system can have contemporary resonance with implications for the future.

Against this backdrop it is clear that conventional wisdom holds to the view that the U.S.-ROK security relationship remains important and is becoming even more important. Those who have argued in recent years for significant cuts in the U.S. commitment to South Korean security<sup>28</sup> or that U.S. strategic commitments in Asia -- including South Korea -- can be counterproductive<sup>29</sup> clearly deviate from that conventional wisdom. In the present war or terrorism circumstances there is virtually no doubt that conventional wisdom's perceptions and

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26 For coverage of those steps, see: Oh Young-jin, "Kim Vows Full Support for US," *The Korea Times*, September 18, 2001, p. 1; Shin Young-bae, "Korea To Provide Non-Combat Support to US," *The Korea Herald*, September 25, 2001, p. 1; and Franklin Fisher, "With Cargo Missions, S. Korea Joins U.S. War On Terrorism," *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, February 4, 2002, p. 1.

27 For coverage of his comment and reactions to it, see: David E. Sanger, "In Speech Bush Calls Iraq, Iran and North Korea 'An Axis of Evil'," *The New York Times*, January 30, 2002, p. 1; John Larkin and Murray Hiebert, "Axis of Uncertainty," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 14, 2002, pp. 12-15; and James Brooke, "South Korea and Japan Begin To Sweat After Bush Turns Up The Heat On North Korea," *The New York Times*, January 31, 2002, p. 1.

28 For prime examples, see: Doug Bandow, *Tripwire*, op. cit., and Selig Harrison, "Time to Leave Korea?" op. cit.

29 For a prominent example, see: Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, (New York: Owl Books/Henry Holt, 2001).

guidance shall prevail for the short-to-mid term. However, the perspective here is geared toward the second half century. That is an entirely different matter. What is deemed important today may well be transformed by shifting criteria and evolving contexts. A variety of contingencies is possible.

One could postulate perpetuation of the strategic status quo, but that is unlikely to endure for the very long run because of the contextual pressures on North Korea. It is likely to sink or swim, not merely tread water. There are a number of circumstances that could lead to a greater North Korean threat that might well be seen in Seoul and Washington as justification for perpetuation of the security treaty well into its second half century -- perhaps beyond, into its second century. Although today North Korea's socioeconomic prospects are quite bleak,<sup>30</sup> this could turn around if the Pyongyang government got its act together. While most observers who consider that possibility to be plausible also deem it conducive to inter-Korean harmony, it might as readily yield a more formidable North Korean garrison state perpetuating its ability to threaten South Korea. While the latter is very unlikely, this prospect cannot be totally discounted. Even if North Korea is unable to reinvigorate itself geopolitically and merely plateaus, it might become relatively more dangerous were South Korea (rather than North Korea) to suffer a crash landing due to some unforeseen economic disaster. In short, were the balance of power between the two Koreas to shift adversely for South Korea due to either of these unlikely events, this could cause the U.S.-ROK alliance's resolve to be stiffened. Were that to occur, the alliance as it is presently configured is likely to be perpetuated.

Putting those rather far-fetched scenarios aside, there are other more plausible ways that perceptions of North Korea's threat could increase over the years. Were U.S.-PRC relations to seriously sour due to

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30 For assessments of its situation and its meaning for U.S.-ROK interests, see: Marcus Noland, *Avoiding the Apocalypse: The Future of the Two Koreas*, (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 2000), and his "The Economic Situation in North Korea," in Wonmo Dong, ed., *The Two Koreas and the United States*, (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2000).

their rivalries worsening, it is entirely plausible that North Korea would side closely with China. As long as South Korea takes the United States' side in any such tensions, that dynamic would add to U.S. motives to stay engaged in South Korea against a Sino-North Korean team. While there are ample reasons for the United States and South Korea to avoid such a rupture with China, it cannot be entirely discounted. Moreover, there is a significant cluster of American specialists in Chinese affairs who contend the United States will need to cope with a rising threat from China in the future.<sup>31</sup> If they prove to be correct, this would provide an opportunity for South Korea to offer to help the United States deal militarily with that Chinese threat. Whether Seoul would deem that opportunity to be attractive is open to serious question.

Another somewhat plausible possibility would involve North Korea learning the wrong lesson from President Bush's "axis of evil" phrase and developing a strategy predicated on a genuine "axis" of countries that feel threatened by U.S. readiness to act preemptively against them because of U.S. threat perceptions. Such an axis would be transformative in ways that clearly were not intended by President Bush's use of that term. This possibility -- and the harsh reactions it could provoke in the United States -- would be as unsettling for South Korea as a China-focused threat. It is highly unlikely that Seoul would want either of these scenarios to reach fruition as the means to perpetuate and enhance the U.S.-ROK security relationship for the out years.

Yet another way that North Korea could loom larger as a threat in the future is if the United States managed to achieve a series of major strategic successes in various other sectors (i.e., peace in the Middle East, harmony in South Asia, and effectively coping with numerous terrorist entities), it is possible that North Korea -- weak or strong -- could loom larger in purely relative terms. Though possible, this too must be relegated to the fringes of twenty-first century geopolitics in terms of the

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31 For influential analyses of that issue, see: Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict With China*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), and Thomas Metzger and Ramon H. Myers, eds., *Greater China and U.S. Foreign Policy: The Choice Between Confrontation and Mutual Respect*. (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 1996).

likelihood of the United States really being that successful. Also, it is far from clear why South Korea would want to utilize such positive global circumstances to preserve a Korean Cold War relic rather than resolve it by nudging North Korea down the same path followed in these other situations and adding the Korean peninsula to the United States' successes.

There are other, more realistic, scenarios in which the United States might well want to prolong its force presence in South Korea aimed at a continued North Korean threat -- and in this sense want to retain North Korea in that function rather than help to reduce or eliminate that role. They all have roots in existing U.S. interests as the fiftieth anniversary approaches. Despite the serious, perhaps catastrophic, qualities of North Korea's ability to do damage to South Korea, Japan, and U.S. forces in both countries, there is a certain proactive utility in keeping a North Korean adversary in place. Although controversial, there is a strong case to be made that the United States benefits from North Korea's existence by being able to use its threat potentials as a rationale or pretext -- depending upon one's perspective -- for a range of U.S. anti-proliferation programs and for the development of a national anti-missile capability. North Korea's location on the PRC's border also is useful in that regard because it enables Americans to dwell on the North Korean threats rather than China's threats. In this sense North Korea provides cover for a broader set of U.S. policies focused on the PRC, but also constitutes highly believable plausible deniability with regard to U.S. intentions vis-a-vis China. Although American arguments on behalf of utilizing North Korea in such a manipulative manner are unlikely to be well received by the United States' South Korean security partners, those arguments may prove viable within the United States.

Another, less controversial, rationale for indefinitely maintaining a U.S. security commitment to South Korea (and perhaps to a future unified Korea) is embedded within U.S. bureaucratic and budgetary politics. Compared to most of what the United States does strategically throughout the Asia-Pacific region which has a decidedly maritime flavor, dominated by the Navy and Marine Corps with sizable Air Force contributions, the U.S. Army's dominant role in Korea constitutes an

exception. This has consequences in terms of regional visibility, billets (including the only Army CINC in the region), and funding. Major U.S. force cuts or elimination in Korea would skew the regional balance among the U.S. service branches even more than it already is in favor of maritime and air power. As a consequence there are inter-service incentives to perpetuate the current mix indefinitely. As much as such incentives can matter on the U.S. side of the U.S.-ROK security relationship, future trends in South Korea -- and more likely in a unified Korea -- that could see Korea becoming more oriented toward maritime and air power in its national security might well undermine such U.S. bureaucratic reasoning.

While there is an array of hypotheticals, with varying degrees of believability, that might well suggest the importance of the U.S.-South Korean security relationship will grow over the coming decades, there are others that are more contrarian. Foremost is the very real possibility that a North Korean threat will cease to exist. This could occur in a variety of ways. Most obvious would be the abject collapse of North Korea due to an intensification of recent trends indicating economic decay that could well auger for societal disintegration. Any development of that magnitude would mean the elimination of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as a state actor and the eradication of its ability to pose the threat that constitutes the central organizing principle behind the U.S. security commitment to South Korea. Something similar could occur through the evisceration of North Korea's armed capabilities, in a lingering but economically wrecked DPRK, that would make it obvious that its threat potentials were a feeble echo of what once made it appear formidable. Another, and more optimistic variant, would entail the negotiated dissolution of the DPRK as part of successful peaceful reunification efforts. In all of these cases the brand of North Korean threat that today justifies a U.S. security commitment on the peninsula would no longer exist.

To be sure, there are reasons used by some American analysts to advocate perpetuation of a U.S. force presence in Korea after unification

occurs (regardless of the interim collapse versus negotiations steps) that make a presentable argument.<sup>32</sup> Such logic may prevail, but this seems unlikely for several reasons. In the wake of Korean reunification there is likely to be a strong sense of Korean national pride and nationalism that will not be particularly well disposed toward retaining any foreign armed forces on Korean soil -- American or otherwise. U.S. forces may stay for a while to help bridge the gap, but the welcome mat is likely to wear out -- in due course -- in the absence of a North Korean threat. In such circumstances the United States may hold out a Chinese or Japanese threat as a substitute. Either may be plausible, but neither is likely to prove durable. China is more likely to be seen as threatening by Americans than by Koreans -- especially if Beijing plays a constructive role in helping to bring about Korean reunification or if Beijing strongly objects to the United States using Korea as part of some kind of U.S. containment policy aimed at China. This containment perspective by Beijing has grown as a result of U.S. efforts in Northeast, Southeast, South, and Central Asia that are partially linked to the war on terrorism.<sup>33</sup> Both sets of Chinese circumstances are very likely to influence adversely Seoul's readiness to retain a U.S. force presence in Korea, especially amongst Koreans experiencing intensified nationalistic fervor.

Using a possible Japanese threat to Korea might well be more plausible to Seoul as a strategic rationale for retaining U.S. forces in a unified Korea in the name of regional stability. South Korean anxieties about Japan's influence over U.S. policy are not new.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Japanese manipulative approaches to the strategic utility of a divided

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32 In addition to the items cited in Note 13, see: Michael O'Hanlon, "Keep U.S. Forces in Korea after Reunification," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Summer 1998, pp. 5-19; William O. Odom, "The U.S. Military in Unified Korea," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Summer 2000, pp. 7-28; and Ralph Cossa, "The Role of U.S. Forces in a Unified Korea," *International Journal of Korean Studies*, Fall/Winter 2001, pp. 117-139.

33 "China feels encircled," *The Economist*, June 8, 2002, p. 39.

34 For an early overview, see: James W. Morley, *Japan and Korea: America's Allies in the Pacific*. (New York: Walker, 1965).



Korea are a source of South Korean concern.<sup>35</sup> Those issues were magnified by the Clinton administration's record to intensifying U.S.-Japan security cooperation through the Nye Initiative<sup>36</sup> that raised Japan's profile relative to Korea's and caused Korean analysts to express greater anxieties.<sup>37</sup> All of this was compounded by the ways the United States' war on terrorism led to heightened Japanese readiness to cooperate militarily with the United States by lowering Japanese societal barriers to military activism<sup>38</sup> and testing the waters of new options -- perhaps including the controversial nuclear option.<sup>39</sup> Cumulatively these factors enhance the plausibility for Korea of a latent Japanese threat. However, this proposition would be a tough sell to the American public who would have to be persuaded why it is logical for the United States to perpetuate a U.S. force presence in two Northeast Asian allies to deter them from being aggressive toward each other. That logic is unlikely to prevail in the absence of a useful surrogate for today's North Korean threat to justify the United States' commitment to regional stability.

American enthusiasm for persevering in the United States' strategic commitment to South Korea, or to a unified Korea, may well be constrained by other factors as well. If one assumes -- as the Bush

35 For useful insights, see: Lee Chae-jin, "U.S. and Japanese Policies Toward Korean Unification" in Lee Chae-jin and Sato Hideo, eds., *U.S.-Japan Partnership in Conflict Management: The Case of Korea*. (Claremont, CA: Keck Center for International and Strategic Studies, Claremont McKenna College, 1993), and Michael H. Armacost and Kenneth B. Pyle, "Japan and the Unification of (Korea: Challenges for U.S. Policy Coordination," *NBR Analysis*, Vol. 10, No. 1, March 1999), Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research.

36 For a key insider's perspective on that issue, see: Joseph Nye, "As U.S. Defends Japan, Who's Being Served?," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 17, 1996, p. 19.

37 For an example, see: Kim Tae-woo, "Japan's New Security Roles and ROK-Japan Relations," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Summer 1999, pp. 147-168.

38 For coverage of Japan's responses to the war on terrorism, see: Kathryn Tolbert and Doug Struck, "Japan Expands Military Role to Support U.S.," *Washington Post*, October 19, 2001, p. 22; and David Lague, "The Japanese Military: New Rules of Defence," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, November 1, 2001, pp. 20-21.

39 Howard W. French, "Nuclear Arms Taboo Is Challenged In Japan," *New York Times*, June 9, 2002, p. 1.

administration does -- that the United States' war on terrorism will be an open-ended commitment, there is every reason to believe the United States will have to confront adversaries in diverse sectors of the world. As long as North Korea remains part of the focus of the United States' strategic attention within this war, then it is safe to conclude that the U.S. commitment to South Korea will remain largely intact. However, if the North Korean threat ends -- as a result of its gradual or sudden collapse, its positive transformation through negotiations, or the regime's toppling as a result of direct U.S. preemptive action aimed at "axis" powers -- the resulting lack of a North Korean adversary in one theater of the war on terrorism will effectively transfigure the dynamic behind that aspect of the war. Why would the United States want to keep U.S. forces in a unified and stable Korea that could more logically be used in other theaters of a prolonged war on terrorism? Arguably the United States may want to retain a United Korea as a partner in such a prolonged war, but it would be as a partner that accepts a mandate to bear responsibility for upholding its end of mutual security by dispatching Korean forces to far flung corners of the world in support of shared missions in a global anti-terrorist coalition. In these circumstances U.S. forces would be pulled from a unified Korea to be used elsewhere, perhaps fighting along side their Korean counterparts in an open-ended war on terrorism. American ardor today for all such activities in the war on terrorism shows no signs of diminishing. It may well last as long as -- or longer than -- the Cold War. If so, then the United States' Korean allies should be prepared for heightened pressures for their strategic assistance outside Korea.

Nonetheless, contemporary Koreans in South and North Korea -- and in a future United Korea -- also need to contemplate the possibility that the American polity could someday produce an administration from the left or the right that would be reminiscent of past U.S. governments that were far less interventionist in their foreign policies. It is possible that some future U.S. government would come from the successor to today's Ralph Nader - Pat Buchanan portion of the American political

spectrum.<sup>40</sup> Were this to occur, Seoul had better have alternative security options in mind and be prepared to adapt to a major U.S. change of course.

Similarly, the United States, too, should bear in mind the possibility that Korea's world view could shift in dramatic ways. As noted above, were China to play a significant role in Korean reconciliation and reunification, the United States would have to adjust to the resulting level of Korean gratitude and deference toward Beijing. Depending on the nature of Sino-U.S. relations at that juncture, this could either be a simple adjustment to broadened U.S.-Korea-China relationships or it could evolve into a very awkward U.S.-Korean relationship in which the United States is at odds with China while its Korean ally tries to avoid getting caught in the geopolitical crossfire.

Korea's world view also could be altered by broader phenomena. Were the cluster of countries constituting Korea's Asian context to pursue the nascent multilateralism that characterizes the post-Cold War international system in the region, this might well alter Seoul's view of the importance of all U.S.-Korea bilateral ties -- including those on the security end of the relationship. The spectrum of possibilities is enormous, ranging from very limited forms of multilateralism to thorough-going institutionalized brands. The more limited it might be, the more likely it is that some form of U.S.-Korea bilateral security ties will persist as part of its foundation. However, were Asia to pursue an Asianized version of the European Union and NATO, the United States could find itself either marginalized or excluded -- depending upon the willingness of Asian countries to welcome the United States to their "club" and upon the United States' readiness to participate in such an organization without being in the driver's seat. Interestingly, any of these multilateral regional outcomes could fit the descriptions outlined in the Security Treaty's preface.

Against the backdrop of such speculation about the alternatives that the next half century could hold in store for either some variety of

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40 For insights into what the Nader-Buchanan alternatives to mainstream U.S. foreign policy represent within U.S. society, see Nader's website ([www.nader.org](http://www.nader.org)) and Buchanan's website ([www.theamericancause.org](http://www.theamericancause.org)).

continuity in U.S.-Korean security relations or some type of parting of the ways, it is advisable for both Seoul<sup>41</sup> and Washington to pay more careful attention to these possibilities and to not make unwarranted assumptions about the future. It would be eminently worthwhile for the responsible agencies in both the United States and South Korea to initiate planning that would address such alternatives. In the United States that would include both the Departments of State and Defense and in South Korea, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and National Defense. As these agencies, and their advisors, assess the alternatives within each country, they can devise a set of options and attendant scenarios that the United States and Korea are likely to pursue. Furthermore, to the extent possible, there should be an enhanced joint effort by the United States and South Korea to consult with each other and try to coordinate their respective policies. Such an approach may prove to be relatively smooth, but -- as some of the previously noted possibilities suggest -- there may well be unexpected potholes and detours in the road that lies ahead for the United States and Korea as they look toward what could be the second half century of their formal security relationship.

If it does last that long, or longer, it will be best if Washington and Seoul work more closely together as decision-making partners than they often did during the first half century. And, equally important, if the security relationship is destined to change course in significant respects, that outcome -- in formats unknown today -- would be best implemented as the result of equally careful joint efforts. In either event, the national interests of the United States and Korea will be best served if both sides work together to facilitate the processes that shall shape their future.

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41 For a prominent South Korean scholar's insights into how the ROK should position itself for a volatile "transitional" era, see: Rhee Sang-woo, "Korea's Strategic Options in the 21st Century," *Korea Focus*, March-April 2002, pp. 51-58 (from the Spring 2002 edition of *New Asia*).