



# DECODING BEIJING'S PERCEPTION OF THE U.S.-SOUTH KOREA ALLIANCE

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## Executive Summary

This policy brief analyses an ideational trajectory in which China's views of the Korean-American alliance evolved during the last 60 years. It first surveys China's general stance on alliances and alliance-making. The report then traces the evolutionary path of Chinese perceptions in the following four periods: (i) the Cold War era (1950s-1960s); (ii) the transformative years (early 1970s-mid-1990s); (iii) the period of a strained alliance (late 1990s-late 2000s); and (iv) an era of great reversal (late 2000s-present). Principally, this brief suggests that China's view of the Korean-American alliance was intense antagonism during the Cold War era, although it was significantly watered down during the transformative years of Sino-South Korean rapprochement. With the normalisation of relations between Beijing and Seoul in 1992 and a decade of progressive rule (1998-2007) in South Korea, China's view encompassed some wishful thinking about a gradually diluted alliance. The strong comeback of the conservatives in South Korean politics since 2008, however, shattered such optimism and re-awoke Beijing to some cold realities of geopolitics. China's view of the Korea-American alliance may grow more negative in tandem with U.S.-China relations, irrespective of the official rhetoric of sovereignty regarding alliances and alliance-making.

<sup>F</sup> This policy brief is an abridged version of "China's Evolving Views of the Korean-American Alliance, 1949-2013," *Journal of Contemporary China*, No. 87 (May 2014), pp. 425-442.



China has become a key player in the shaping of the global economy and security, posing a strategic dilemma for the international community. For many nations, taking advantage of China's rise and, at the same time, consolidating ties with America as insurance, has proven to be more difficult than anticipated. This dilemma has become more acute and intricate for East Asian nations that maintain formal alliance relationships with the United States (U.S.). The challenge is particularly daunting for South Korea, poised right between its strategic ally, U.S., and its strategic cooperative partner, China.<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of the Cheonan sinking in 2010, Washington and Seoul carried out joint military drills in the Yellow Sea – codenamed “Critical Determination” – to deter Pyongyang from making further provocations. China immediately voiced fierce criticism and opposition. China's intense reactions merit our attention since, from the demise of the Cold War up to that point, Beijing's position on the Korean-American alliance was rather implicit, largely nuanced, and mostly restrained.<sup>2</sup> Over the last six decades, China's view of the ROK-U.S. alliance was neither static nor fixed but has continued to evolve. Despite the importance of the topic, however, little has been available on how and why Beijing's perceptions of the U.S.-Korea alliance have changed over time.

It is suggested here that the evolutionary trajectory of China's perceptions of the Korea-U.S. alliance over the past six decades was shaped and conditioned by the following four factors. First, during the Cold War era, China's view of the alliance oscillated in tandem with Beijing's strategic calculi vis-a-vis the Soviet Union and the U.S. When the Soviet threat was deemed more serious, there was more room for China's tolerance of America's East Asian alliances. Second, during the transformative years (from the 1970s through the 1990s), China was tolerant of the ROK-U.S. alliance as Beijing did not wish to jeopardise her newly burgeoning relationships with Washington and Seoul because of something that was not yet an imminent threat. Third, in the post-9/11 context, where Soviet threat totally disappeared and U.S.-China rivalry became an emerging issue, China's criticisms of America's alliances in Asia became increasingly vocal. Fourth, policy oscillations in South Korea were additional key factors in shaping China's view.

This report consists of three parts. The first part surveys China's policy toward alliance and alliance-making. The second part traces the evolutionary path of Chinese perceptions of the ROK-U.S. alliance for the following four periods: (i) the Cold War era (1950s-1960s); (ii) the transformative years (early 1970s-mid-1990s); (iii) the years of a strained alliance (late 1990s-late 2000s); and (iv) an era of great reversal (late 2000s-present).

<sup>1</sup> See Andre Schmid, *Korea between Empires, 1895-1919* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); and Jae Ho Chung, *Between Ally and Partner: Korea-China Relations and the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> See, Li Qingsi, “U.S. Plays Korean Card to Perfection,” *China Daily*, 30 June 2010; “South Korea Should Rethink Joint Drill,” *Global Times*, 8 July 2010; and “Meiguo duihua zhengce bianlema?” (Has America's China Policy Changed?), *Huanqiu zazhi* (Global Magazine), 9 August 2010.

## China's Policy toward Alliance and Alliance-Making

China's stance on alliance is that sovereign states are entitled to form alliances voluntarily with others. This is explained by two factors: (i) China, preoccupied with the notion of sovereignty, honors what other sovereign states decide to do on their own as much as it expects others to respect what she decides to do within her sovereign domains; and (ii) China was involved in an alliance with the Soviet Union against the U.S.<sup>3</sup> In the aftermath of the outbreak of the Sino-Soviet schism, Beijing entered into yet another alliance with Pyongyang in 1961 although, from the outset, "the same bed, different dreams" were discernible in this queer relationship.<sup>4</sup>

Upon embarking on the path of systemic reform and opening, China made it clear that it would pursue self-reliant independent foreign policy. One key strategic derivative was the position of not entering into any alliance thereafter. In September 1982, Deng Xiaoping confirmed that China's foreign relations were to be based on the tenets of independence, self-reliance, and non-alliance [*bujiemeng*]. In May 1984, Hu Yaobang, then the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, reaffirmed Deng's position on non-alliance.<sup>5</sup> Although the total number of countries with which China established diplomatic relations rose from 99 in 1978 to 172 in 2010, not a single nation was able to form an alliance relationship with Beijing.

Worth noting is that China has neither abolished nor revised the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with North Korea. Two reasons account for this anomaly. First, the Treaty cannot be abrogated unless both parties agree to do so. Because of Pyongyang's growing geostrategic value in a newly unfolding strategic game in Northeast Asia, China obviously does not wish to be the first to propose it. Second, given the uncertainties surrounding the region, China wishes to retain the Treaty as an option poised against the Korean-American alliance.<sup>6</sup> Irrespective of the legal tenure of the Treaty, since the 1980s, Beijing has been cautious not to highlight the military nature of the Treaty, thereby maximising the strategic ambiguity as to China's automatic obligation to defend Pyongyang.<sup>7</sup>

Since the mid-1990s, China's non-alliance policy evolved into a new paradigm of "partnership" [*huoban guanxi*].<sup>8</sup> Officially, partnership entails three components: no antagonism between partners, no alliance against a third party, and risk-sharing between partners [*budidui, bujiemeng, tongdang fengxian*].<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Beijing's principal view is that while China does not formally oppose alliances as a consensual act between sovereign states, she is firmly against the alliances being directed against a specific third party. That is, depending on the extent to which an alliance presupposes China as a specific target, China's view of it varies between extreme hostility and high tolerance.

<sup>3</sup> For China's formal position on alliances in general, see Stuart Harris and Richard N. Cooper, "The U.S.-Japan Alliance," in Robert D. Blackwill and Paul Dibb (eds.), *America's Asian Alliances* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 47-48.

<sup>4</sup> Wu Lengxi, *Shinian lunzhan 1956-1966 - zhongsu guanxi huiyilu* (The Ten-Year Debate: Recollections of the Sino-Soviet Relationship) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1999), Vol. 1, pp. 510-533; and Yang Kuisong, "Changes in Mao Zedong's Attitude toward the Indochina War," *Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) Working Papers*, No. 34, 2002, pp. 1-43.

<sup>5</sup> *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* (Collected Works of Deng Xiaoping, 1975-1982) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1983), p. 372; and Hu Yaobang, "Zhongguo duli zizhu duiwai zhengce de shizhi" (The Nature of China's Self-Reliant Independent Foreign Policy), *Renmin ribao*, 19 May 1984.

<sup>6</sup> Niu Weigan, "Lun lengzhan yiliu de meihan tongmeng" (On the U.S.-Korea Alliance Inherited from the Cold War) in *Junshi lishi yanjiu* (Studies of Military History), No. 2, 2009, pp. 116-123.

<sup>7</sup> See Jae Ho Chung and Myeong-hae Choi, "Uncomfortable Allies or Uncertain Neighbors? Making Sense of China-North Korea Relations, 1949-2009," *Pacific Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2013, p. 252.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of this transition, see Qi Pengfei, *Zhongguo gongchandang yu dangdai zhongguo waijiao, 1949-2009* (The Chinese Communist Party and Contemporary Chinese Foreign Policy) (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2010), pp. 108-125.

<sup>9</sup> Zhang Jianhua (ed.), *Jiejue zhongguo zaidu mianlin de jinyao wenti* (Resolving the Urgent Problems that China Is Facing Again) (Beijing: Jingji ribao chubanshe, 2000), pp. 508-519; and Lu Lu, "Zhongguo waijiao zhanlue zhong 'huoban zhanlue' de lishi yanbian ji xianshi tantao" (Historical Changes and Contemporary Meanings of Partnership Strategy in China's Diplomatic Strategy), *Chuan Cheng* (Inheritance), No. 8, 2007, pp. 24-26.

## The Cold War Years: Enmity and Antagonism

During the 1950s and 1960s, in the face of formidable and provocative North Korea, South Korea had no other choice but to rely heavily on the alliance. In this period, Seoul remained a loyal client of Washington. So long as South Korea's security was firmly guaranteed, compromises on sovereignty and national self-esteem were deemed acceptable.

China's view of the South Korea-U.S. alliance during these Cold War years was three-fold. First, China held an antagonistic perspective

as it regarded the alliance as a serious threat to her security interests. Second, China paid close attention to the asymmetrical nature of the ROK-U.S. alliance in which South Korea's sovereignty was viewed as being seriously inflicted upon and potentials for conflict were deeply embedded.<sup>10</sup> Third, China viewed the U.S.-Korea alliance as Washington's meticulous design to deter Seoul's unilateral actions against Pyongyang.<sup>11</sup> This is analogous to the Chinese view of the U.S.-Japan alliance as Washington's veiled device to constrain the revival of a militarist Japan.

## The Transformative Years: Guarded but Pragmatic

President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972 and the subsequent rapprochement between Washington and Beijing led to significant changes in China's view of the Korean-American alliance (as well as of the Japan-U.S. alliance). During the 1970s, with the Soviet threat looming large, China viewed the ROK-U.S. alliance as less detrimental to its security interests. Premier Zhou Enlai reportedly commented that America should retain military forces in Asia and in the Korean Peninsula to maintain a stable balance of power there.<sup>12</sup> As long as China was the weakest of the great strategic triangle and the Soviet threat deemed more threatening, Beijing was willing to tolerate the presence of American forces on the Korean Peninsula.

Since the launch of reforms and opening in the late 1970s, China regarded maintaining peace

and stability in the region as the utmost priority. Naturally, North Korea's confrontational strategy became increasingly incompatible with China's preferences. In January 1980, Huang Hua, Foreign Minister of China, remarked that "[I]t is unlikely that the two Koreas will be unified in an immediate future...[Therefore] We share with the United States and Japan the perspective on the American forces stationed in South Korea. Maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula is central to sustaining stability in the region."<sup>13</sup> By the early 1980s, China's view of the ROK-U.S. alliance became one of tolerance.

Throughout the 1980s, the buzzword in South Korea was the "northern diplomacy" [*nordpolitik* or *bukbang jongchaek*], the highlight of which was the rapprochement with China. In retrospect, Seoul's efforts for normalising diplomatic relations

<sup>10</sup> Wang Chuanjian, "Cong shuangchong ezhi dao shuangchong guizhi" (From Double Containment to Double Regulation), *Meiguo yanjiu* (American Studies), No. 2, 2002, p. 36; and Hou Shifu and Shen Qingxi, "Ershi shiji qishi niandai de meihan tongmeng" (The U.S.-Korea Alliance during the 1970s), *Hebei ligong daxue xuebao* (Academic Bulletin of Hebei Polytechnic University), No. 3, 2006, pp. 41-43.

<sup>11</sup> Zhang Yushan, "Xindi yuan zhengzhi huanjing xiade hanmei tongmeng guanxi" (The Korea-U.S. Alliance under the New Geopolitical Environments), *Yafei congheng* (Surveying Asia and Africa), No. 5, 2006, pp. 41-42.

<sup>12</sup> Wang Jianwei and Wu Xinbo, *Against Us or With Us? The Chinese Perspective of America's Alliances with Japan and Korea* (Stanford: Institute for International Studies, 1998), note 78. Also see Aileen San-Pablo Baviera, "The China Factor in U.S. Alliances in East Asia and the Asia-Pacific," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 57(2), (2003), p. 350.

<sup>13</sup> Sung-po Chu, "Peking's Relations with South and North Korea in the 1980s," *Issues and Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 11, 1986, pp. 70-71.

with China were conducted fairly independently of America's directing.<sup>14</sup> In fact, President Roh Tae Woo sought to widen Seoul's diplomatic horizon, which had been hitherto dominated by the U.S. and Japan. South Korea's growing national pride based on her economic performance and democratic transition in 1987 also played a key role.

China's view of the Korean-American alliance evolved more positively in the 1980s. Beijing assessed the alliance as a contributing factor in coping with the Soviet threat in East Asia (at least up to the late 1980s). China no longer viewed the alliance as detrimental to her security interests or as targeting herself.<sup>15</sup> Two reasons account for these changes. For one, in the immediate aftermath of the diplomatic normalisation with the U.S. in 1979, China was not eager to pour cold

water on warm relations with Washington by taking issue with the latter's alliances in Asia. For another, China was at the time involved in an intricate process of rapprochement with South Korea and was not willing to ruin the valuable opportunity by provoking Seoul.<sup>16</sup>

From the early to mid-1990s, right after the long-awaited diplomatic normalisation, Seoul and Beijing had a brief period of "honeymoon," during which both were highly willing to accommodate each other while avoiding confrontation. There was even a moment of tacit strategic cooperation between South Korea and China against Japan's "soft" provocations on the issues of history and textbook. In fact, some Chinese even viewed the ROK-U.S. alliance as a mechanism of checking on the rise of Japan.<sup>17</sup>

## **The Alliance under Strain and China's "Rushed" Generalisation (1998-2007)**

The decade of 1990s started with colossal changes – the demise of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Eastern Europe. One unexpected outcome of the sea changes was bringing China up front to face the U.S. With the sudden contraction of Russia's global tentacles, "China threat" was trumpeted in some corners of Washington and Tokyo. Other signs of growing tension were also discernible: the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, the controversies surrounding Missile Defense (MD), and the reconnaissance plane (EP-3) incident

between the U.S. and China in 2001. America's concern with China's ascent became increasingly manifest during this period and, naturally, China became wary of the U.S. military actions and their implications for the region as a whole.

From 1998 onward, South Korean politics went through radical changes as the first-ever transfer of power was made to the "progressive" opposition party led by Kim Dae Jung. The Kim administration (1998-2003) pursued a dual-track strategy of engagement toward China on one hand and the

<sup>14</sup> Jae Ho Chung, "Korean Strategic Thought toward China: A First Cut," in Gilbert Rozman, In-Taek Hyun and Shinhwa Lee (eds.), *Korean Strategic Thought toward Asia* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 153-178; and Shen Dingchang, *Hanguo waijiao yu meiguo* (Korea's Foreign Relations and the United States) (Beijing: Shehuikexue wenxian chubanshe, 2008), ch. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Wang and Wu, *Against Us or With Us?*, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> The issue of the South Korea-U.S. alliance was not even on the agenda when Seoul and Beijing negotiated for diplomatic normalization in 1992. South Korea regarded it solely as a domain of sovereignty and China then viewed it as a non-imminent issue. See Chung, *Between Ally and Partner*, ch. 6.

<sup>17</sup> See Wang Fan, "Meihan tongmeng ji weilai zouxiang" (The U.S.-Korea Alliance and Its Future Prospect), *Waijiao xueyuan xuebao*, No. 2, 2001, p. 65; and Yan Jing, *Chushi hanguo* (Assigned to Be the Ambassador to Korea) (Jinan: Shandong daxue chubanshe, 2004), p. 17.



Sunshine Policy toward North Korea on the other, neither of which made Washington happy.<sup>18</sup> The Kim administration's decision not to participate in America's MD scheme (unlike Japan and Taiwan), the Sunshine Policy, and the inter-Korean summit in June 2000 which endorsed Beijing's long-held position of "*independent and peaceful unification*" [*zizhu he heping tongyi*], as opposed to Washington's "peaceful unification," shaped China's view that the South Korean-American alliance was undergoing significant changes. As inter-Korean relations further improved after the summit, threat perceptions diverged between Seoul and Washington. Seoul was more interested in family reunion, confidence building, economic cooperation and overall tension reduction with Pyongyang, whereas Washington paid more attention to nuclear non-proliferation, missile control, and weapons of mass destruction.

In the summer of 2002, South Korean media were flooded with reports commemorating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic normalisation with China. At about the same time, South Korea-U.S. relations plummeted to a record low in the wake of an incident where two school girls had been overrun by a U.S. army vehicle. Anti-American sentiments were undoubtedly a contributing factor in Roh Moo-Hyun's unexpected victory. The Roh Administration (2003-2008), along with the 17<sup>th</sup> National Assembly won by Roh's progressive party, introduced drastic changes to the strata of South Korean elite. According to a survey conducted in 2002 on South Korean opinion leaders, 86 per cent wished to see South Korea's ties with China further strengthened while the comparable figure

for the U.S. was only 14 per cent. In a 2004 survey on 138 newcomers to the 17<sup>th</sup> National Assembly, 55 per cent chose China as a more important foreign policy target than the U.S.<sup>19</sup>

The Roh Administration's external strategies were unconventional in that they sought for some breathing space of its own by adjusting the alliance with the U.S.<sup>20</sup> Beijing's awareness of such changes shaped China's view of the Korean-American alliance during this period. First, the Roh Administration inherited its predecessor's Sunshine Policy with little change, which China supported more fervently than the U.S. The continuation of the Sunshine Policy further amplified the discrepancies between the U.S. and South Korea in terms of threat perception concerning North Korea, thereby leading China to believe that significant changes were taking place in the alliance.<sup>21</sup>

Second, in dealing with the U.S., the Roh Administration underscored the need for "independent diplomacy with self-esteem" – i.e., differences were to be explicitly noted rather than concealed or unilaterally imposed. The heated debates throughout 2004 concerning the size, location, and timing of dispatching South Korean forces to Iraq were highly illustrative of the Korean-American alliance under strains at the time.

Third, the Roh Administration's attention to the East Asian community building presupposed in part the weakening of bilateral hub-and-spoke alliances that the U.S. maintained in the region. The novel concept of "Northeast Asian balancer"

<sup>18</sup> Samuel S. Kim, "Inter-Korean Relations in Northeast Asian Geopolitics," in Charles K. Armstrong, Gilbert Rozman, Samuel S. Kim and Stephen Kotkin (eds.), *Korea at the Center: Dynamics of Regionalism in Northeast Asia* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2006), pp. 170-171.

<sup>19</sup> See William Watts, *Next Generation Leaders in the Republic of Korea: Opinion Survey Reports and Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Associates, April 2002), p. 12; and *Dong-A Ilbo*, 19 April 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Chung-in Moon and Taehwan Kim, "South Korea's International Relations: Challenges to Developmental Realism?" in Samuel S. Kim (ed.), *The International Relations of Northeast Asia* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), p. 271.

<sup>21</sup> A 2005 survey conducted by the Mansfield Foundation and *Kyung Hyang Sinmun* (*Kyung Hyang Daily*), pointed to a nearly unanimous agreement among the expert respondents that the U.S.-Korea alliance was undergoing profound changes. See [http://www.mansfieldfdn.org/pubs/pub\\_pdfs/khsm\\_summary.pdf](http://www.mansfieldfdn.org/pubs/pub_pdfs/khsm_summary.pdf) (last accessed on 18 December 2005).

[dongbuk'a gyunhyongja] was interpreted by China as Seoul's proactive effort to dilute America's clout over the region, which was therefore received rather positively by Beijing.<sup>22</sup>

Seoul's negotiations with Washington since 2003 concerning "strategic flexibility" - i.e., on what terms the U.S. forces may be deployed in and out of South Korea to cope with regional contingencies - was indicative of the Roh Administration's agony on maintaining good relations with both the U.S. and China. The agreement stipulated in January 2006 was that Seoul was to respect Washington's need for strategic flexibility, while the latter was to respect the former's concern with the possibility of American forces in South Korea being deployed in regional conflicts that Seoul wished to avoid being sucked into.<sup>23</sup> This ambiguous outcome provided additional grounds for Beijing to conclude that the ROK-U.S. alliance was no longer what it used to be.

China's view of the Korea-U.S. alliance of this period was multi-faceted. China paid close attention to key sources of discord embedded in the alliance by branding them as "cacophonies" [*buhexie yindiao*], "layers of contradictions" [*cengceng maodun*], and "serious differences" [*yanzhong chayi*]. The overall assessment was that these discords were not likely to be resolved easily. In 2005, *World Affairs* [*shijie zhishi*], a

magazine published by China's Foreign Ministry, carried an article entitled "Does South Korea Still Need an Alliance with the U.S.?"<sup>24</sup>

China then assessed that South Korea's external strategy was directed at moving gradually away from the U.S. while getting closer to China [*qinhua shumei*]. A Chinese analyst commented that "Washington's effort to disrupt South Korea-China relations was baffled by Seoul."<sup>25</sup> Another Chinese analyst went so far as to argue that "the Korea-U.S. alliance with fifty-year history is now facing a great challenge due to the 'China factor.'"<sup>26</sup> Regarding the issue of strategic flexibility, China also held the view that Seoul had no other option but to "swallow" it due to Washington's obstinate insistence.<sup>27</sup>

During this period, many Chinese analysts chose to use the term *lianmeng* instead of *tongmeng* in referring to the ROK-U.S. alliance. While the two are often interchangeable, the former denotes more loose alignments and entail less of a military connotation.<sup>28</sup> Of the thirty-five Chinese journal articles published on the Korean-American alliance during 2000-2011, seven deployed the term *lianmeng* and six of them were published during the period of the Roh Administration. In stark contrast, since 2009, most Chinese analyses referred to the alliance as *tongmeng*. In retrospect, there certainly were

<sup>22</sup> Li Dunqiu, "Lu Wuxuan - zuo junhengzhe" (Roh Moo-Hyun to Perform as Northeast Asia's Balancer), *Shijie zhishi* (World Affairs), No. 11, 2005, pp. 30-33.

<sup>23</sup> *Dong-A Ilbo*, 21 January 2006; and *Chosun Ilbo*, 2 and 3 February 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Lin Jing, "Hanguo - Hai yaobuyao hanmei xiemeng?" (Does Korea Still Need This Blood Alliance with the U.S.?), *Shijie zhishi*, No. 13, 2005, p. 32. Also see Li Zhijun, "Chu zai shizilukou de meihan tongmeng" (The U.S.-Korea Alliance at the Crossroads), *Guoji wenti yanjiu* (Studies of International Relations), No. 5, 2005, p. 49.

<sup>25</sup> Li Zhijun, "Chu zai shizilukou de meihan tongmeng," p. 53.

<sup>26</sup> Cui Zhiying, "Hanmei tongmeng guanxi de xinbianhua ji weilai zouxiang" (New Changes and Future Prospect for the Korea-U.S. Alliance Relationship), *Dangdai hanguo* (Contemporary Korea), No. 4, 2006, p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> Li Jun, "Zhuhan meijun 'zhanlue linghuoxing' de neihan ji yingxiang" (The Implications of the Strategic Flexibility of the American Forces Stationed in Korea), *Xiandai guoji guanxi* (Contemporary International Relations), No. 4, 2006, p. 52.

<sup>28</sup> For instance, see <http://cihai.org>; [http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2002-12/19/content\\_664530\\_6.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2002-12/19/content_664530_6.htm); and <http://news.sina.com.cn/wl/sd/2010-10-26/094521353546.shtml>.

some rushed generalisations based on wishful thinking on the part of China.<sup>29</sup> To a considerable extent, the Chinese view at the time was a mixture of empirical analysis and wishful thinking.

What China was unwilling to see was the fact that favourable views of China declined fast in South Korea since 2004 when the Koguryo

history controversy erupted.<sup>30</sup> During the Roh Administration, not only the ROK-U.S. alliance underwent serious challenges, the seeds for growing concern with the “rise” of China were also planted. It is not clear if China was at the time keenly aware of such perceptual changes on the part of South Korea.

## A Great Reversal (2008-2012)

The election of Lee Myung-bak as the new President in December 2007 put an end to a decade of progressive government in South Korea. Not only was there a surge of new conservative elites but the Lee Administration's priority was also placed on the consolidation of the ROK-U.S. alliance. At the Camp David summit in April 2008, Lee and George W. Bush agreed on developing the bilateral relationship into a “strategic alliance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” At another summit between Lee and Barack Obama in June 2009, the Joint Vision was announced and the bilateral relationship was formally designated as a “comprehensive strategic alliance” based on common values. The scope of the alliance was to expand beyond the Korean Peninsula and include cooperation on peace-keeping, counter-terrorism, non-proliferation, and post-conflict

stabilisation, on many of which Beijing's position differed from Washington's.<sup>31</sup>

On the surface, South Korea upgraded her relationship with China too, from a “comprehensive cooperative partnership” to a “strategic cooperative partnership” at the Beijing summit between Lee and Hu Jintao in May 2008. In contrast with the rhetoric, however, it remained largely unclear where the relationship was actually upgraded.<sup>32</sup> Despite the official explanation that the new designation extended areas of cooperation beyond mere bilateral ties, no concrete evidence was available for such cooperation on regional or global issues. It was obvious that, compared to the past two governments, the Lee Administration's relationship with the U.S. was much stronger in both rhetoric and practice.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Yang Hongmei, “Meihan tongmeng tiaozheng de dongli” (The Locomotive for Readjusting the U.S.-Korea Alliance), *Xiandai guoji guanxi*, No. 8, 2005, pp. 24-25, 45; Wang Weimin, “Chijiu de bujunheng: zhanhou meiri meihan tongmeng bijiao yanjiu” (Lasting Imbalance – A Comparative Study of the Post-War U.S.-Japan and U.S.-Korea Alliances), *Shixue jikan* (Journal of Historical Research), No. 5, 2006, pp. 49-50; and Zhang Weiwei, “9-11 yilai rimei tongmeng yu meihan tongmeng de chayixing” (The Post-9/11 Differences between the Japan-U.S. and U.S.-Korea Alliances), *Riben xuekan* (Japan Studies), No. 1, 2007, pp. 33, 38.

<sup>30</sup> See Chung, *Between Ally and Partner*, ch. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Nirav Patel and Lindsay Ford, “The Future of the US-ROK Alliance: Global Perspective,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2009, pp. 402-403.

<sup>32</sup> Given that China established the same “strategic cooperative partnership” with India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, it is not clear where South Korea shares common grounds with these three nations.

<sup>33</sup> As the Chinese refer to it, “the Seoul-Beijing relationship is healthy in general terms but carries some ‘dark currents’ under it.” See Zhan Xiaohong, *Donglin mianmianguan - toudi hanguo* (Faces of China's Eastern Neighbor – Looking into Korea) (Jinan: Shandong daxuechubanshe, 2010), p. 43.

Then there came two tests for Sino-South Korean relations in 2010: first, the sinking of the South Korean corvette Cheon'an in March and, later, the North Korean shelling of Yongpyong Island in November. Despite the Chinese government's pledges to "get down to the bottom of the matter" [*shifei quzhe*], Beijing did not endorse the joint investigative report on the Cheon'an sinking, nor did it support a resolution against North Korea at the United Nations. More problematic was China's stance on the Yongpyong shelling which marked North Korea's first ever attack on the South's land territory since 1953. China's position was little different from that on the Cheon'an sinking, again, attributing the provocation to South Korea's "unnecessary military drills in the disputed area." China's logic is faulty since it implies that South Korea may also attack the North at will as long as Seoul feels threatened by Pyongyang's military exercises. China's position on the Yongpyong shelling generated much outcry against China in South Korea, adding fuel for consolidated ties with the U.S.<sup>34</sup>

China's view of the Korea-U.S. alliance during this period is multi-faceted. Above all, since 2008, among Chinese experts and academics, candid reflections were readily available on the fallacy of hastily generalising the changes that had occurred in the Korea-U.S. alliance during the Roh Administration. To a considerable extent, Chinese analysts now acknowledge that they chose to see only what they wished to see in the Korean-American alliance.<sup>35</sup>

In spite of the candid reflections noted earlier, China continues to pay close attention to a range of problems embedded in the alliance. Two key words are discernible from the Chinese analyses: sovereignty [*zhuquan*] and nationalism [*minzuzhuyi*]. It seems that Chinese analysts have not given up their hope for the possibility that the ROK-U.S. alliance may someday dissolve itself due to these two factors. In relations to the sovereignty factor, China has closely watched the issue of wartime operational control.<sup>36</sup> When the decision was announced to postpone the scheduled transfer for three more years until the end of 2015, the Chinese government issued no formal statement. Official media, however, commented that "the South Korean government 'proactively' [*zhudong*] delayed the transfer of wartime operational control, but different opinions were expressed within South Korea."<sup>37</sup>

In addition to raising voices against joint military drills by the U.S. and South Korea, Chinese analysts have already begun to offer recommendations on what Seoul must and must not do. Some advise that South Korea must weaken her relationship with the U.S. as America is bound to decline.<sup>38</sup> Others are critical of the fact that the ROK-U.S. alliance has become stronger, broader, and more comprehensive, and even warn against the possibility of South Korea joining the U.S. scheme of containing China.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Kim Jiyeon and Woo Jung-yup, *Yonpyongdo pogyok satae gwanlyon gingeup yoron jos bogoseo* (Report on the Survey Regarding the Yonpyong Shelling Incident) (Seoul : The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, November 2010), p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> See Xia Liping, "Lun meihan tongmeng de xiufu yu kuozhan" (On the Revival and Expansion of the U.S.-Korea Alliance), *Meiguo wenti yanjiu* (American Studies), No. 1, 2008, pp. 71-81; and Zhou Hui, "Chaoyue chuantong: Meihan qingli dazhao xinxing zhanlue tongmeng guanxi" (Beyond the Tradition: The U.S. and Korea Strive to Produce a New Type of Alliance Relationship), *Xiandai junshi* (Contemporary Military Affairs), No. 5, 2010, pp. 16-19.

<sup>36</sup> The transfer of peacetime operational control of South Korean armed forces back to Seoul was decided in 1991 and carried out in 1994, although wartime operation control is still retained by the Combined Forces Command.

<sup>37</sup> *Huanqiu shibao*, 29 June 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Zhou Hui, "Chaoyue chuantong," p. 19. Also see Li Hongmei (editor of *People's Daily*), "Uncle Sam Too Senile to Lead Asia," *People's Daily*, 9 October 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Keyu Gong, "The Korea-U.S. Alliance from a Chinese Perspective," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2012, pp. 310-327; and Weimin Wang and Hua Xin, "Redefinition of the U.S.-ROK Alliance and Implications for Sino-ROK Relations: A Chinese Perspective," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2012, pp. 285-302.



## What about the Future?

What about the future? The short answer is not so much of a positive one. The faster the power gap between Washington and Beijing is bridged, the louder China's voice against the U.S. alliance system will become.<sup>40</sup> Worse, Sino-American confrontation has recently shown some signs of being locked in: (i) America's alliance consolidation vs. China's partnership extension; (ii) America's "rebalancing" vs. China's "peaceful rise"; (iii) Washington's AirSea Battle vs. Beijing's A2/AD; (iv) the US TPP vs. China's RCEP; and (v) America's "Washington Consensus" vs. China's "Beijing Consensus." The whole dynamics appears to offer middle and smaller powers less room for effective or easy hedging.<sup>41</sup>

As long as Beijing's position on North Korean remains that of "changing the colors of its face but never turning its back on Pyongyang" [*bianlian bu fanlian*], South Korea has no other choice but to consolidate the alliance with the U.S.<sup>42</sup> South Korea's nascent fear regarding the rise of China is another factor. Despite Beijing's repeated assurance, many nations that share borders and history with China are not so comfortable with China's ascent. In fact, South Korean perceptions of China have consistently worsened in recent

years and the same can be said of Chinese views of South Korea.<sup>43</sup> If this were a harbinger of what would be forthcoming, South Korea would certainly be inclined to rely more on the alliance with the U.S.

Related are domestic politics in South Korea. A Chinese analyst comments: "[A]s long as the conservatives remain in power in Seoul, the ROK-U.S. alliance is not likely to weaken."<sup>44</sup> Many Chinese analysts now believe that, whoever is in power, as the later years of the Roh Administration and the Lee Government demonstrated, South Korea is not likely to give up the alliance with the U.S. completely.

If the aforementioned factors are in full operation, the U.S.-South Korea alliance will increasingly be a thorn on China's side; Beijing will find it threatening and intolerable. As such, China's view of the alliance will grow more negative and antagonistic, irrespective of the official rhetoric of sovereignty regarding alliance and alliance-making. As many have suggested, trust-building and strategic communication is very much needed, but will they ever suffice to dispel the age-old security dilemma?

<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, Cao Shengsheng and Xia Yuqing, "'Quanzhi gongyu' chengwei xinshi de meiguo baquanzhuyi lilun" ("The World as Public Arena" Is Becoming America's New Hegemonic Theory), *Taipingyang xuebao* (The Pacific Journal), No. 9, 2011, pp. 24-32.

<sup>41</sup> Even though the ROK-U.S. alliance is not likely to list China as its target, the simultaneous consolidation of the ROK-U.S. and Japan-U.S. alliances is probably alarming and threatening enough to China to reposition itself. See Zhang Weiwei, "Meiri meihan tongmeng de tongbu qianghua ji qi yingxiang" (The Simultaneous Consolidation of the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-Korea Alliances and Its Influence), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhe luntan*, No. 3, 2011, pp. 4-5; and "Asian Security Needs Upgrade Not Alliances" (Editor's Note), *Global Times*, 26 July 2012.

<sup>42</sup> See Wang and Li, "Meihan tongmeng zaidingyi yu hanguo de zhanlue xuanze," pp. 110, 112.

<sup>43</sup> A Gallup survey of 2011 on nine nations in Asia finds that 57 percent of South Korean respondents support U.S. leadership while the figure for Chinese leadership is only 30 percent (*Chosun Ilbo*, 22 November 2011). Also see Wang Xiaoling, *Zhongguoren xinmu zhongde hanguo xingxiang* (The Image of Korea in the Minds of Chinese) (Beijing: Zhongguo minzu chubanshe, 2009), pp. 374, 378, 438.

<sup>44</sup> Song Xingxing, "Meihan tongmeng guanxi de yanbian he qianjing" (Changes and Prospects for the U.S.-Korea Alliance Relationship), *Shijie congheng* (Contemporary World), No. 7, 2010, p. 51.

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