WORKING PAPER NO. 392

INSTABILITY IN THE US-ROK ALLIANCE: KOREAN DRIFT OR AMERICAN SHIFT?

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Canberra
August 2004

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:
Taylor, Brendan, 1974-
Instability in the US-ROK Alliance:
Korean Drift or American Shift?

ISBN 0 7315 5459 0.

1. United States - Foreign relations - Korea (South).
2. Korea (South) - Foreign relations - United States.
3. United States - Military policy. 4. Korea (South) Military policy. I. The Australian National University. Strategic and Defence Studies Centre. II. Title. (Series: Working paper (The Australian National University. Strategic and Defence Studies Centre); no. 392).
355.0310973095195

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Series Editor: Meredith Thatcher
Published and distributed by:
Strategic and Defence Studies Centre
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200
Australia
Tel: 02 6125 9921
Fax: 02 6248 0816

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Abstract

The US-ROK alliance appears to be in a state of decline which many commentators regard as potentially terminal. The paper attributes this to Washington's increasing proclivity to view Pyongyang through the lens of its *global* strategy of preventing the proliferation of WMD technologies and components to rogue states and terrorists groups, leading to a reduced emphasis on the more specific *regional* objective of deterring a North Korean attack against the South. Seoul has sought to compensate for the heightened sense of insecurity this shift has generated by pursuing an 'engagement' policy toward the North, while simultaneously undertaking a renewed drive to demonstrate the continued relevance of the US-ROK alliance and South Korea's commitment to it. History suggests that this strategy will serve to improve South Korea's relative security position vis-à-vis the DPRK while still ensuring that the US-ROK alliance remains intact. Yet there is also little to indicate that it will produce any genuine reduction in the tensions currently afflicting the relationship. Instead, the paper concludes that these appear destined to persist for some time, barring an improbable realignment of America's *global* and *regional* strategic priorities.

Instability in the US-ROK Alliance: Korean Drift or American Shift?

Brendan Taylor

The US-ROK alliance currently appears in a state of decline which many commentators regard as being potentially terminal. Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Kurt Campbell, for instance, suggests that 'the relationship may already have taken on less significance and become relegated to the ash heap of old alliance partnerships, given the difficulties in finding common ground for how to deal with North Korea'.[1] In similar vein, Korea expert Nicholas Eberstadt argues that 'absent a compelling rationale for its continuation, this alliance will come under mounting pressure for revision, and even termination'.[2] Likewise, Ralph Cossa, who has previously maintained that the alliance will ultimately survive,[3] more recently expressed the view that the US-ROK relationship is 'in for some tough times' and that 'the alliance may be in trouble'.[4]

Traditional theories of alliance politics suggest that 'balance of power' and 'balance of threat' are key variables in determining alliance formation and cohesion.[5] Against these criteria, the US-ROK security relationship ought to be in much better shape than currently appears to be the case. During the past decade North Korea has moved to concentrate approximately 80 percent of its total firepower in and around Seoul, the capital city of South Korea.[6] It has expanded the number and range of chemical (and possibly) biological weapons in its arsenal. And it has continued efforts to accelerate its already burgeoning nuclear weapons program. While many still question the quality of the military capabilities currently at Pyongyang's disposal, few dispute the devastation which the North could unleash upon its Southern neighbour, as well as parts of Japan, in the event of a Second Korean War.[7] Further, one commentator has even gone so far as to suggest that 'the imminent prospect of North Korea becoming a nuclear power is the most severe threat to the security of the United States and the rest of the Western world today'.[8]

It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that the gulf between Washington and Seoul appears only to have widened in the face of these developments. This paper seeks to account for that apparent contradiction. While ostensibly the result of US-ROK disagreements over how to deal with the growing threat posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), it argues that these fissures are actually the product of a deeper shift in US strategic thinking. The paper characterises this adjustment in terms of an increasing

proclivity on the part of Washington to view Pyongyang through the lens of its *global* strategy of preventing the proliferation of WMD technologies and components to rogue states and terrorists worldwide, leading to a reduced emphasis on the more specific *regional* objective of deterring a North Korean attack against the South. Because South Korea continues to attach greater importance to the direct military threat posed by the DPRK, it is understandable that this shift has generated much trepidation in Seoul. The ROK has sought to compensate for its heightened sense of insecurity by pursuing an 'engagement' policy toward the North. This approach, however, has had the unintended 'side-effect' of deepening tensions between Washington and Seoul, which the latter has subsequently tried to alleviate by undertaking a renewed drive to demonstrate the continued relevance of the US-ROK alliance and South Korea's commitment to it.

As this paper goes on to detail, this essentially 'dual track' approach of engaging the North while simultaneously trying to demonstrate the continued relevance of the US-ROK security relationship is not unlike that adopted by Seoul during previous periods of instability in the alliance. History suggests that this strategy will again serve to improve South Korea's relative security position vis-à-vis the DPRK while still ensuring that the US-ROK alliance remains intact over the short-to-medium term. At the same time, however, it is unlikely to produce any genuine reduction in the tensions currently afflicting the relationship. Instead, the paper goes on to conclude that these appear destined to persist for some time yet, barring an improbable realignment of America's *global* and *regional* strategic priorities.

Is South Korea Drifting?

The most common explanations for the current instability in the US-ROK alliance emphasise either Seoul's diminishing threat perceptions vis-à-vis Pyongyang or partially related, yet inherently deeper, shifts that are occurring in South Korean public opinion. According to the first line of argument, policymakers in Seoul no longer view the North Korean threat with quite the same urgency as many in Washington, particularly since the initiation of Kim Dae-Jung's so-called 'Sunshine Policy' toward the North in the late 1990s.[9] A number of recent developments would appear to have reinforced this line of reasoning. In June of this year, for instance, the two Koreas concluded a landmark agreement containing measures to cease propaganda broadcasts along their shared land border and to avoid accidental clashes at sea. The first steps in actually implementing this agreement were timed to coincide with the fourth anniversary of the historic inter-Korean summit of June 2000. Against the backdrop of such

developments, the ROK has also gradually become the North's largest source of trade, aid and tourism.[10]

A second explanation for the current US-ROK tensions focuses on the growing pervasiveness of anti-Americanism in South Korean society. Advocates of this rationale point out that, where once almost the exclusive preserve of leftist organisations and student activists, anti-American sentiment is now rife in policymaking circles and has become particularly endemic amongst younger and better-educated South Koreans.[11] Indeed, according to one recent public opinion poll, 63 percent of South Koreans now view the US in unfavourable terms while 56 percent perceive that anti-American sentiment is on the increase.[12] The mass candlelit vigils and public expressions of anger which occurred in late 2002 following the acquittal of two US soldiers over the accidental death of two Korean schoolgirls are typically cited as examples of this groundswell of anti-Americanism. More recent public demonstrations against plans to send additional South Korean troops to Iraq can be viewed in a similar light.

While initially compelling, each of these explanations become less robust when subjected to closer scrutiny. A number of indicators, for instance, suggest that South Korean public opinion on the issue of the US-ROK alliance is actually quite complex. By way of example, in June of this year the Pentagon announced plans to withdraw a third of the American troops stationed on the Korean Peninsula before the end of 2005. Although a majority of South Koreans surveyed immediately following the announcement indicated that any drawdown of US forces would not impact upon their personal sense of security, 61.3 percent responded that it could produce a security vacuum on the Korean Peninsula. Meanwhile, 64.5 percent of respondents believed that Seoul should continue to place 'greatest focus' on the US-ROK alliance when it comes to security matters.[13] It is also important to bear in mind that the aforementioned public demonstrations of late 2002 were met with large-scale counter-demonstrations by Korean War veterans and religious groups expressing support for the alliance.[14] More recently, the tragic beheading of a South Korean hostage in Iraq also provoked a rally in Seoul at which conservative protesters called for the government to send additional combat troops to that theatre.[15]

Suggestions that South Korean threat perceptions vis-à-vis the North have diminished are equally contestable. US plans for a relatively rapid troop withdrawal, for instance, have encountered opposition in Seoul, where a staged cutback over a seven-to-eight year timeframe is said to be preferred.[16] In a recent interview on the subject, South Korea's President Roh Moo Hyun even suggested postponing the discussion of US troop relocation altogether

while tensions on the peninsula remain.[17] Admittedly, this opposition could stem from a perception that Washington's troop withdrawal plans have been made with a view to removing a key political obstacle to a future US strike against North Korea's nuclear facilities. However, the fact that Seoul's resistance to this particular policy course derives largely from the enormous damage which DPRK anticipatory and retaliatory strikes could potentially inflict on the South suggests that the threat from North Korea is still perceived to be a very real one.

Or has America Shifted?

A more compelling explanation for the instability in the US-ROK alliance focuses on the extent to which Washington's perceptions regarding the *nature* of the threat posed by North Korea have become increasingly divergent from those held in Seoul. This divergence is largely attributable to the fact that the US has come to see the DPRK threat more in the context of its *global* strategy of preventing the proliferation of WMD technologies and components to rogue states and terrorists worldwide, leading to a reduced emphasis on the more specific *regional* objective of deterring a North Korean attack against the South. Given that South Korea continues to attach greater importance to the direct military threat posed by the DPRK, which it views as one to its very survival, it is not surprising that this shift has generated a high level of trepidation in Seoul. While this anxiety has become most pronounced in the period since the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, its existence can in fact be traced back over a decade.

Prior to the ending of the Cold War, the proliferation of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons received relatively little attention in the US, largely because the threat posed by these weapons categories was seen almost exclusively in terms of the Soviet Union and its allies. The 1990-91 Persian Gulf War experience, however, raised public, media and congressional concern about WMD proliferation. Subsequently, as David Cooper reflects, 'by the middle of President Clinton's first term, anti-proliferation had become firmly established at the center of a new national security orthodoxy. What just a few years before had been the concern of a small clique of lowly bureaucrats had now become a major day-to-day focus of the most senior officials'.[18] North Korea became very much the first 'test case' of this policy for the Clinton Administration.

Early indications that this fundamental shift in America's strategic priorities would generate instability in the US-ROK security relationship became apparent toward the end of the 1993-94 North Korean nuclear crisis. Many South Koreans were reportedly resentful at being essentially shut out of negotiations in Geneva at which the crisis was resolved.[19] There was also dissatisfaction that the resultant 1994 Agreed Framework emphasised non-proliferation objectives and virtually ignored the conventional military threat posed by the DPRK, even though Seoul was to shoulder approximately 70 percent of the costs associated with its implementation. South Korean President Kim Young-Sam subsequently went to great lengths to inhibit any degree of further rapprochement in relations between Washington and Pyongyang. His Administration also exhibited severe reluctance when it came to implementing the 1994 accord and the attendant Kuala Lumpur agreement on the supply of two light-water-reactors (LWRs) to the North.[20]

Tensions between Washington and Seoul intensified further in September 1996 after a North Korean submarine was found to have run aground off South Korea's eastern coast. The ROK responded by suspending virtually all inter-Korean exchanges — including relief aid, business deals and its support for the LWR project — which it vowed to resume only upon the receipt of a formal apology from the North. The severity of this reaction can be seen to reflect the ROK's acute sense of vulnerability to the North Korean military threat, of which the submarine infiltration was representative. Washington's immediate reaction to the crisis displayed little empathy for this perceived susceptibility, however, particularly when Secretary of State Warren Christopher called upon *both* Koreas to 'avoid taking any further provocative actions'.[21]

Having weathered these storms, the US-ROK alliance enjoyed somewhat smoother sailing in the period from 1998 up until the end of the Clinton Administration. This was notwithstanding the advent of a crisis in August 1998 following the DPRK launch of what appeared to be a medium-range Taepo Dong-I missile over Northern Japan and the detection of suspect underground activity at a site near Kumchangri (twenty-five miles northeast of North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear facilities) during the same year. There are at least two possible explanations for the relative stability in US-ROK alliance relations during this period. One is that the initiation of President Kim Dae-Jung's 'Sunshine Policy' muted the effects of Washington and Seoul's diverging strategic priorities by de-emphasising the direct military threat posed by the North and by reducing ROK opposition to the 1994 Agreed Framework process. A second is that the implementation of the

1999 Perry Review contributed toward a greater level of 'strategic coherence' in the approaches of the US and its allies toward the DPRK. By way of example, the establishment of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) can be seen to have improved the capacity of the US, Japan and South Korea to better align their policies toward the DPRK.

The fundamental divergence in American and South Korean strategic priorities became evident once again, however, soon after President George W Bush took office in January 2001. A number amongst the team of very experienced foreign policy hands that Bush assembled around him — such as Vice-President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz — were long-time North Korea 'Hawks' who were on record warning of DPRK ballistic missile and nuclear capabilities.[22] While giving his rhetorical support both to the 'Sunshine Policy' and the TCOG process, the President himself portrayed North Korea as a 'threat' and, during his first summit meeting with Kim Dae-Jung in March 2001, expressed scepticism as to whether Pyongyang was adhering to the 1994 Agreed Framework. While the release of the Administration's North Korea Policy Review findings in June 2001 eased tensions between Washington and Seoul somewhat by reaffirming support for the US-ROK alliance, endorsing the 'Sunshine Policy' and by adding conventional arms control to the agenda for future negotiations with the DPRK, these gains were largely offset by the September 11 terrorist attacks.

During the period since, the Bush Administration has emphasised the North Korean threat almost exclusively in the context of its *global* strategy of preventing the flow of WMD components and technologies to terrorist groups and other 'rogue states' worldwide. In his January 2002 State of the Union address, for instance, the President controversially labelled the DPRK as part of an 'axis of evil' which 'by seeking weapons of mass destruction . . . could provide these arms to terrorists'.[23] The Administration's first concrete policy response to this emerging threat subsequently came in the form of the so-called Proliferation Security Initiative. While not targeted specifically at the DPRK, preventing the flow of WMD-related technologies to and from that country was clearly the issue of the day exhibiting the most direct relevance, and one that was widely seen as representing the initiative's first 'test case.'[24] More recently, the US has insisted upon the non-negotiable goal of CVID (a complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantling of the North Korean nuclear program) in the latest nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula, even as its other negotiating partners (China, Japan, Russia and South Korea) continue to urge a more moderate approach.

Washington and Seoul's differing perceptions regarding the *nature* of the North Korean threat not only generate divergent policy priorities and prescriptions. At a deeper level, they also raise fundamental questions over whether the basic rationale for the US-ROK alliance remains valid. Indeed, this is a problem confronting the entire US alliance system as it continues to undergo the evolutionary and adaptive processes initially prompted by the evaporation of the Soviet threat and the emergence of a range of new security challenges. Kurt Campbell has even gone so far as to suggest that these developments have fundamentally altered the *nature* and *purpose* of America's alliance relationships. In his terms:

> The reality is that we are currently seeing a change in U.S. alliances or, more precisely, a change in emphasis among the many alliances. In the face of new kinds of security concerns, the United States has in fact given more value to those alliances that can reliably support U.S. interests in the war on terrorism and participate decisively in coalitions of the willing. Some of this change in emphasis predated the war on terrorism, but the attacks of September 11, 2001 served as a catalyst to accelerate pre-existing proclivities. Like most wars, the global war on terrorism has stimulated the rethinking of old relationships, created new ones ... and, in some cases, given lower priority to inherited alliances that have less relevance to meet current global challenges.[25]

Campbell goes on to note that this very dynamic is the primary reason for Washington and Seoul's inability to find some kind of 'common ground' for dealing with North Korea.[26] The withdrawal of US forces from the Korean Peninsula is open to a similar interpretation. The Bush Administration's official line, of course, is that the troop cutback is entirely consistent with a broader 'transformation' in where and how US armed forces are based overseas, which the Pentagon argues will serve to improve the military's flexibility and agility.[27] However, the fact that 3,600 of these troops will be redeployed to Iraq — a key theatre in the 'Global War on Terror' — is in itself highly symbolic and arguably reflects the change in emphasis to which Campbell refers. Likewise, consistent with Campbell's observation that some of this change in emphasis predated the global war of terrorism, the lack of consultation afforded Seoul in earlier periods of tension on the Peninsula — such as during the 1993-94 DPRK nuclear crisis — might also be seen as reflecting the lower priority attached by Washington to the US-ROK alliance relationship.

Seoul's 'Dual Track' Response

Rather than explaining Seoul's policy of 'engagement' toward the DPRK as a product of diminished threat perception, therefore, it is also possible to rationalise it as a 'tactical' response to what can easily be construed as Washington's declining level of commitment to the alliance relationship. There is certainly at least one clear historical precedent to support this line of argument. During the mid-1960s, as US military operations in Vietnam expanded, Seoul began to question the credibility of the American security commitment to South Korea. A number of developments in the late 1960s and early 1970s reinforced this perception. First, following the January 1968 attack by North Korea on the US intelligence ship *Pueblo*, Washington disappointed Seoul by 'privately' negotiating the return of the ship and its crew.[28] President Nixon's virtually *ad hoc* announcement of the Guam Doctrine[29] in July 1969, and the concomitant withdrawal of 20,000 US troops from the Korean Peninsula in 1971, subsequently generated deep uncertainty and confusion in Seoul. South Korea was then not consulted prior to Nixon's historic visit to China in February 1972, notwithstanding the fact that the PRC was a close ally of North Korea.[30]

These latter two developments were again the product of a fundamental shift in America's *global* strategic priorities. Struggling to maintain the human and financial costs associated with waging the Vietnam War — costs that were beginning to worsen an already eroding US strategic position vis-à-vis the USSR — Nixon and his National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, saw American rapprochement with Beijing and Moscow as a way of counterbalancing the threat posed by each. Moreover, such an approach was considered as having the added advantage of facilitating a reduced *regional* role for US forces in Asia. Seoul responded to this shift by actively engaging Pyongyang. South Korean President Park Chung Hee opened secret negotiations with his DPRK counterpart Kim Il-Sung almost immediately and, in January 1972, the two leaders issued a Joint Statement pledging to reconcile their differences and to work toward reunification. The following year, Park also announced his intention to normalise relations with other non-hostile Communist countries.[31]

Although these efforts ultimately produced little, there is certainly a case to be made that Seoul's more recent attempts to engage Pyongyang have exhibited a good deal of strategic merit. For, should the security situation on the Korean Peninsula deteriorate to the point of open conflict, the chances of Pyongyang lashing out against the South must surely be lower now than if DPRK-ROK relations were at a complete impasse or exhibited a greater degree of hostility. Hence, one could argue that Seoul has compensated for

what it sees as a diminished US commitment to the alliance by seeking to improve its own security position vis-à-vis North Korea. The primary problem with such an approach, however, is that it has created the impression in some US circles that Seoul wishes to make itself politically neutral between Washington and Pyongyang. This, in turn, has generated an even greater reluctance to expend American blood and treasure in the name of defending an ungrateful and uncommitted ally. The words of columnist and CNN host Robert Novak reflect this view: 'I think it's outrageous that this government is trying to make itself equidistant, the South Korean government, between North Korea and us, when our blood, American blood, saved their country a half a century ago.'[32]

Seoul's relatively lukewarm response to the September 11 attacks served to reinforce this perception. While the Kim Dae-Jung government did contribute a small military support package to assist US efforts in Afghanistan — which included 4 C-130 aircraft, a naval landing ship tank (LST) and a 150-member mobile army surgical hospital (MASH) — it reportedly sought to limit the extent of its commitment right from the outset. Indeed, according to Nicholas Eberstadt 'perhaps no other U.S. military ally was so conspicuously unwilling to participate in the post-September 11, America-led reveille against terrorism'.[33] The same can certainly not be said of the ongoing Iraq campaign, however, where the ROK contribution has been rather more substantial. Seoul responded to the onset of this conflict by pledging humanitarian and economic assistance, while also authorising the dispatch of 700 non-combat troops. In February 2004, the South Korean Parliament subsequently approved a government-submitted plan to deploy an additional 3,000 troops to the Iraqi theatre. Once implemented, this commitment will make South Korea the third largest contributor to coalition forces in Iraq, after the US and Britain.[34]

South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun has tended to emphasise his country's Iraq contribution in the context of solidifying the US-ROK alliance relationship.[35] In this regard, it can be seen as part of a renewed drive to demonstrate the continued relevance of the alliance and South Korea's commitment to it. Once again, there is a clear precedent for this type of approach. When Seoul perceived that America's commitment to the relationship was waning in the mid-1960s, it responded positively to a request from Washington to deploy ROK forces to Vietnam. In return for the 50,000 troops it would ultimately send to this theatre, President Park received a pledge from the Johnson Administration that it would not reduce the level of US forces on the Korean Peninsula without first consulting Seoul.[36]

This rather substantial attempt to demonstrate the continued relevance of the alliance relationship, however, appears to have had only a marginal impact in terms of solidifying US-ROK security ties. Indeed, as noted previously, the ensuing period was one of the more unstable in the history of the relationship. Seoul responded to this continued instability with repeated attempts to secure more substantive security assurances from Washington, namely in the form of a NATO-like 'automatic guarantee' that America would intervene in the case of future hostilities. In addition to obtaining somewhat lesser pledges of support from Washington, these efforts resulted in the initiation of the annual *Team Spirit* US-ROK military exercises in June 1976. Overall, however, this period was characterised by persistent South Korean fears of 'abandonment' by its superpower ally.[37]

Indeed, it was not until the election of President Reagan in 1980 that the relationship began to show real signs of recovery. Reagan came to office vowing to deter Soviet expansionism by re-establishing American predominance and saw the ROK as a loyal East Asian ally in this larger quest. He re-affirmed the importance of America's alliance relationships and was particularly intent upon resuscitating US credibility in the Asia-Pacific region. Consistent with this, Reagan confirmed that US troops would remain on the Korean Peninsula indefinitely, while also approving the sale of advanced military equipment to the ROK, including F-16 aircraft. In line with the broader trend which has become apparent during the course of this analysis, therefore, it is possible to attribute the renewed attention his Administration afforded the relationship to the fact that America's *global* and *regional* strategic priorities had once again converged.

The Future of the US-ROK Alliance — More Drift, Less Shift?

It is difficult, however, to foresee any similar realignment of priorities occurring as long as America's major strategic preoccupation remains waging the Global War on Terror (GWOT). While it is conceivable, of course, that Washington could initiate hostilities with the DPRK in the context of this broader campaign, the execution of an already demanding operation such as this would be complicated still further by the fact that American forces are currently so badly stretched in Iraq and Afghanistan.[38] US policymakers may nevertheless feel compelled to undertake such action under given circumstances, as in the case of some form of 'nightmare scenario' wherein the DPRK had demonstrably aided a terrorist organisation in obtaining either a nuclear device or its requisite components for subsequent use against an American target(s). Based on the Bush Administration's response to the September 11 attacks, however, the Kim

Jong-Il regime (for all its purported 'irrationality')[39] must surely be aware that its participation in such a potentially catastrophic event would provoke an unequivocal American response. Such an outcome would be in neither Pyongyang's or Seoul's best interests, particularly in view of the fact that the latter would likely be able to exert little influence over the nature and scope of the US response, notwithstanding the significant collateral damage that DPRK anticipatory or retaliatory strikes could inflict upon the ROK.

Putting this highly unpalatable scenario to one side, Seoul appears likely to continue with an essentially 'dual track' approach of seeking to improve its security position vis-à-vis the North while simultaneously endeavouring to keep the US-ROK alliance intact. Notwithstanding ongoing domestic opposition, the majority of South Korean policymakers will almost certainly concede that the benefits of maintaining the relationship far exceed the costs. In addition to the direct military and strategic gains afforded by security cooperation with the US, it is important to acknowledge here that the alliance also serves South Korea's broader economic objectives.[40] By way of example, a recent report produced by the state-funded Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP) predicted that the continued erosion of the relationship could ultimately have severe implications for the South Korean economy.[41]

Seoul's efforts to preserve the alliance are, nevertheless, likely to be complicated by a continuing divergence in America's *global* and *regional* strategic priorities. Over the longer-term, the rise of China is perhaps the only development with the potential to occasion any genuine realignment in these. While it has been suggested that China's rise could also have the opposite effect, with the ROK trading its alliance with the US for a new security tie with the PRC, most commentators agree that South Korea will likely continue to view America as its most important partner. Although China and South Korea certainly do share close historical and cultural affinities, in addition to exhibiting a burgeoning degree of economic interdependence, this judgement appears to be based largely on the suspicions which Seoul continues to harbour over Beijing's longer-term intentions.[42]

Whether China's rise will eventually occasion a realignment in America's *global* and *regional* strategic priorities, or whether South Korea will even be forced to make a choice between these two powers, remains very much open to question. A number of commentators are adamant that the US and China are destined to clash at some point in the future due to their conflicting interests and diverging views regarding a whole host of military, political,

strategic, economic, legal and normative issues.[43] According to this perspective, the current, largely anticipated rapprochement between Beijing and Washington is simply unsustainable.

A powerful set of counter-arguments can, however, be mounted in response to these claims. First, the deepening level of mutual economic dependence between America and the PRC acts as a compelling incentive for maintaining good relations. Second, the PRC leadership has a number of political motives for not rocking the bilateral relationship at this point in time, particularly as they seek to solidify their own position during a period when both the society and system of government over which they preside is undergoing profound transformation. Third, Beijing also faces compelling strategic disincentives for allowing its relationship with Washington to deteriorate, not least due to the fact that China remains, at a minimum, several decades away from being able to pose any genuine military challenge to the US. Taken together, these considerations suggest that the current 'honeymoon period' in US-Sino relations could well be more robust than many analysts have thus far been prepared to acknowledge.[44]

While the jury is still very much out on the longer-term future of the US-Sino relationship — and hence on its potential ramifications for the US-ROK alliance — Korean reunification during the interim could have an equally profound impact. On the one hand, such a development may completely undermine the rationale for a continued US military presence on the peninsula. Conversely, the potentially heightened strategic significance of a unified Korea could also increase America's willingness to maintain a physical presence in this part of the world, either as a check on growing Chinese power, a hedge against any resultant Japanese search for greater self-reliance in security affairs, or as a vehicle for promoting increased Japanese-Korean security cooperation.[45]

While the US must remain mindful of the fact that Korean reunification could happen sooner rather than later, however, chances are that the challenges presented by this potentiality are also unlikely to become wholly apparent in the short-to-medium term. It is important to bear in mind that the Kim Jong-Il regime has already survived a decade of severe national economic hardship, and that it could well endure considerably longer. The external assistance provided by North Korea's neighbours will likely be sufficient to ensure that the DPRK leadership does not collapse in the foreseeable future. Such an event may also be delayed by Kim Jong-Il's flirtation with more market-based economic activities, and the potential to learn from China's experience under Deng and his successors. Beyond this, suitably deterred by the substantial costs associated with German

reunification, many in Seoul reportedly oppose Korean reunification, even if this ultimately means living with a nuclear North Korea.[46]

In the final analysis, therefore, the findings of this paper suggest that there is little cause for optimism that the current instability in the US-ROK alliance will soon abate. Seoul's ongoing attempts to reduce its own sense of insecurity through 'engaging' Pyongyang are not likely to play particularly well in the US. At the same time, however, ROK efforts to demonstrate the continued relevance of the alliance and their commitment to it will probably be sufficient to ensure that the relationship remains intact, at least for the foreseeable future. Contrary to the common perception that the US-ROK alliance is in a state of terminal decline, therefore, the foregoing analysis suggests that those charged with managing the relationship will most likely be able to 'muddle through' these current difficulties, to borrow from the title of Marcus Noland's oft-cited article on North Korea.[47] What this paper also suggests, however, is that we are unlikely to see the alliance return to anything resembling the 'halcyon days' of the Reagan era, barring an improbable realignment of America's *global* and *regional* strategic priorities.

Notes

1 Kurt M Campbell, 'The End of Alliances? Not So Fast', *The Washington Quarterly*, volume 27, no. 2, Spring 2004, p. 151.

2 Nicholas Eberstadt, 'Our other Korea problem', *The National Interest*, Issue 69, Fall 2002, p. 111.

3 See, for example, Ralph A Cossa, 'Korea: Alliance at Risk?', *PacNet*, Number 53B, Pacific Forum CSIS, 20 December 2002.

4 Ralph A Cossa, 'U.S.-ROK: Tough Times Ahead?', *PacNet*, Number 5, Pacific Forum CSIS, 27 January 2004.

5 See, for example, Stephen M Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

6 Center for Defense Information, 'Standoff with North Korea: War Scenarios and Consequences', 9 May 2003. Available from the World Wide Web: (http://www.cdi.org/north-korea/north-korea-crisis.pdf). [Accessed 10 July 2004].

7 For an excellent survey of North Korea's military capabilities see Joseph S Bermudez, *Shield of the Great Leader: The Armed Forces of North Korea*, (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2001).

8 Stephen J Morris, 'Averting the Unthinkable', *The National Interest*, Issue 74, Winter 2003/2004, p. 99.

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