

Identity Politics and Policy Disputes in U.S.-Korea Relations

During the South Korean presidential campaign of 2007, President Lee Myung Bak pledged to prioritize and strengthen a United States–Republic of Korea (U.S.-ROK) alliance widely regarded as strained. “Disagreement over North Korea was always the main obstacle to good relations [with the United States],” one of Lee’s foreign policy advisors asserted upon the new president’s inauguration. Such disagreement did not exist between President Lee and President Bush, the advisor insisted, paving the way for a better bilateral relationship.¹ Indeed, only weeks into Lee Myung Bak’s presidency, longtime Korea observer Michael Breen noted it was immediately clear that the new government was not going to treat North Korea as a special case, as its predecessors had. According to Breen, “This government sees the North Korea issue as a foreign policy issue—and not even the most important one.”²

Although the 2007 campaign did not turn on these issues, Lee’s campaign pledges for improved relations with the United States and a tougher line toward North Korea were significant. Only five years earlier, during the 2002 presidential race, such rhetoric would have proved untenable. At that time, a second North Korean nuclear crisis had just occurred, and candidate Roh Moo Hyun’s vows to continue engagement with the North despite the crisis were clearly at odds with the Bush administration’s desire to isolate Pyongyang. Also preceding the 2002 election, a massive wave of anti-American sentiment erupted in response to the handling of a U.S. military training accident that killed two Korean schoolgirls. Catholic priests went on a hunger strike, and tens of thousands of Koreans—not just activists but middle-class adults—protested against the United States. At the same time,

Roh gave a campaign speech under a banner reading “Yankee Go Home!”³ Even conservative candidate Lee Hoi Chang, who had proudly demonstrated his ties to the United States by visiting Washington, DC, early in the campaign, later distanced himself from his country’s traditional ally in response to the clear sentiment of the nation. On the eve of the U.S.-ROK alliance’s fiftieth anniversary, South Korea—long perceived to be one of the United States’ most stalwart partners—was dubbed by the *New York Times* as “one of the Bush administration’s biggest foreign policy problems.”⁴

The tumult of demonstrations drew to a close soon after Roh Moo Hyun’s inauguration,⁵ but anti-American sentiment persisted. According to a 2003 Pew survey, aside from the Arab states, South Korea was identified as one of the most anti-American countries, along with France and Russia.⁶ Similarly, a 2004 RAND report showed that many Koreans who had previously held a favorable view of the United States had abandoned this position and joined the ranks of those holding an unfavorable view.⁷ As new progressive policy elites sought to reassess history and the United States’ role in inter-Korean relations and unification, the alliance became a subject of intense debate within the South. Although it may be a myth that there was ever a “golden age” in U.S.-ROK relations⁸ and both Washington and Seoul officials made a habit of denying any signs of tension,⁹ developments in U.S.-Korean relations during these years led many scholars and experts on Korean affairs to question the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance.¹⁰

Over these years, political change had come to Washington, DC, as well. From its inception, the Bush administration had been deeply skeptical of efforts to engage North Korea, including the Clinton administration’s 1994 Agreed Framework and the South’s Sunshine Policy. The new U.S. president conveyed these views in a March 2001 meeting with Kim Dae Jung, whose diplomatic mission to Washington, DC, was widely perceived as a failure.¹¹ Subsequently, the September 11 terrorist attacks focused U.S. attention on the dangerous potential nexus between rogue states with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities and terrorists seeking to strike the American homeland. From the perspective of the Bush administration, which said it had new evidence that North Korea was pursuing an enriched uranium route to nuclear weapons, this regime presented a grave security threat to the United States and was to be isolated until it reversed course.

This thinking would collide with ROK policies and sentiments. Seoul advocated continuing inter-Korean cooperation, despite the nuclear prob-

lem, which it assigned to the realm of U.S.-DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) relations. In contrast to the U.S. view, many in the ROK had come to see their northern neighbor as a poor sibling in need of assistance, rather than a dangerous state building up its asymmetric threat capabilities.

No anti-Koreanism appeared in the United States comparable to the anti-Americanism seen in the ROK, but many U.S. experts and observers of Korean affairs—champions of the alliance—reacted strongly to the Roh government and the wave of sentiment that had lifted it to power. Michael Armacost, former ambassador to Japan and longtime Korean affairs observer, noted that even “conservative commentators who [had] long supported the alliance with South Korea—e.g., William Safire, Dick Allen, Ken Adelman, and Charles Krauthammer—[had] expressed sharp criticism of recent ROK policies.”¹² Initially drawn to Seoul by the story of anti-American demonstrations, the U.S. news media had, by early 2003, begun to focus on the growing U.S.-ROK policy rift over North Korea and the best approach to its apparently renewed pursuit of nuclear weapons.

What had happened to fifty years of robust alliance relations? Had they been irreparably damaged? Or were the strains merely “growing pains,” bound to emerge in the maturation process of such an unequal relationship forged in the cold war? If the mood of the Korean public changed, would U.S.-ROK relations get back on track? Could administrations in Seoul and Washington with similar policy approaches to the North restore relations? Had the alliance entered a new era? Was the alliance really in need of a new strategic rationale?

Since the election of Lee Myung Bak in late 2007, expectations have been high on both sides of the Pacific that this change in leadership would revive the troubled alliance. The Lee administration has promised to stress the importance of the U.S.-ROK alliance and has declared its intention to pursue a “pragmatic” course in foreign policy, in contrast to the ideologically driven Roh administration.¹³ The replacement of Bush with Obama has likewise increased expectations for a bright future for the alliance. Indeed, one could argue that the overlap of Roh and his team of “386” advisors¹⁴ with Bush and the neoconservatives was the least workable combination of leadership and that those days are now over.

Unwarranted optimism must be avoided, however, and Lee's first year in office proved the need for caution. Lee's presidency has gone forward in a

context transformed in recent years, and returning to any other (fondly remembered) point in time seems impossible. The Obama administration also has to deal with many daunting tasks inherited from the Bush administration (e.g., war on terrorism, financial crisis), and the North Korean nuclear problem remains as a key policy challenge for both nations. The events, disagreements, and policies of recent years were not simply the outcomes of a mismatch between U.S. and Korean administrations or of a particular policy dispute (e.g., over North Korea) but rather reflections of larger trends and changes in both nations.

Although the alliance should focus on the future, rather than the past, in moving forward, it is imperative to understand the underlying causes of strains in the bilateral relationship from the early 1990s to more recent years—a critical period that may well be remembered as the height of identity politics and policy discord. This study seeks to explain how the U.S.-ROK relationship has been affected by seminal changes in these allies' environments: the end of the cold war, the South Korean transition from authoritarianism to democracy, and the strategic reorientation spurred by the September 11 terrorist attacks. The main goal of the study is not simply to trace responses to events during this critical period but rather to offer analytical perspectives that will be useful in understanding the perceptions and implications borne of these changes. As the Lee government and the newly established Obama administration seek to find ways to enhance their alliance, the past experiences and lessons that this book addresses should be given serious consideration.

Sources of the Strain: Anti-Americanism or Policy Rift?

From the end of the cold war through the years of the Sunshine Policy and the elections of Bush and Roh, various developments contributed to straining U.S.-ROK relations and provoked serious debate over their origins and repercussions. In basic terms, two major arguments have been advanced to explain the strained relationship during this period.

The first argument is the *anti-Americanism thesis*, which points to the ostensible rising tide of anti-Americanism in South Korea as the principal source of bilateral tension. Literature that focuses on anti-Americanism in South Korea connects the phenomenon to a multitude of factors: the generational divide and demographic change in the South, the U.S. war

on terror and other Bush administration policies, Korean nationalism, reduced threat perceptions of North Korea, views of China as a viable strategic partner alternative, supposed historic U.S. complicity in the suppression of Korean democracy, and a perception of U.S. arrogance based on events ranging from the U.S. military's alleged disregard for South Korean citizens to a perceived unfair judgment in speed-skating contest in the 2002 Winter Olympics in Utah.¹⁵

In particular, two events in 2002 sparked major outpourings of anti-American sentiment in Korea: first, President Bush's characterization of North Korea as a member of the "axis of evil" during his State of the Union address in January, and second, a U.S. military training accident in June, in which two South Korean schoolgirls died after being crushed by an armored vehicle. In line with these events, public opinion polls showed a clear deterioration in South Koreans' views of the United States. Many in the South, especially those in their twenties and thirties, contended that not only had the United States failed to appreciate Korean interests, but it had also actively pursued policies running *counter* to them. As a U.S. expert on Korean affairs noted, "The Korean brand of anti-U.S. sentiment exhibits the notion that the United States blocked the national will of the people, reflected in the perceived lack of American respect for [Korean] foreign and domestic concerns," especially inter-Korean engagement.¹⁶

To be sure, this recent wave of anti-Americanism was neither entirely new nor unique to Korea. Similar sentiment had roiled U.S.-Korea relations in the past, including during the U.S. occupation following the end of colonial rule (1945–1948), when the Carter administration intended to withdraw U.S. troops from the South in the late 1970s, and during the democracy movement of the mid-1980s.¹⁷ After 2001, anti-American sentiment rose in other parts of the world, as well. As the sole superpower of the post-cold war era, the United States has been criticized by many nations, including traditional allies, for unilateralism, especially in connection with the war on terror.¹⁸ Joseph Nye, chairman of the National Intelligence Council and an assistant secretary of defense in the Clinton administration, concurred with these foreign critics when he pointed to "increasing evidence that the policies and tone of the new unilateralists were directly responsible for the decline of America's attractiveness abroad."¹⁹

Yet the fundamental challenge that recent Korean protests posed to the alliance distinguished it from prior instances of anti-Americanism. In the past,

bouts of anti-Americanism had rarely questioned the basic rationale for the alliance; rather, security-related provocations from the North had spurred ever-closer cooperation between Seoul and Washington. However, in the fall of 2002, anti-U.S. sentiment did not abate with the resurrection of the nuclear threat from North Korea. Instead of cooperating more with the United States, the government in Seoul advocated an autonomous defense and pressed for continuing inter-Korean cooperation.²⁰ In years past, Korean governments had been quick to suppress anti-American movements led by dissident intellectuals, activists, and opposition politicians, but in 2003, many of the figures who had previously taken to the streets in protest became newly minted policy elites of the Roh administration. Just as these individuals were absorbed into institutional politics, it has been argued, the anti-American themes they advocated transcended dissidence into influence on government policies.²¹

The second explanation for recent problems in the U.S.-ROK relationship can be termed the *policy rift thesis*, as it refers to the allies' diverging perceptions of the North Korean threat and the consequent policy rift over how to deal with North Korea pursuing nuclear weapons. For example, a study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, entitled "South Korean Views of the United States and the U.S.-ROK Alliance," concluded that "it is the apparent difference in perceptions of and policy toward North Korea, that is challenging most seriously the foundations of the alliance."²² Similarly, a report from an opinion leaders' seminar convened by a Washington-based think tank, the Korea Economic Institute, noted South Korea's "decline in trust of the United States" and warned that "if the United States and South Korea could not reach agreement on how they viewed the North Korean threat, the U.S.-ROK alliance would be in grave trouble."²³

According to the policy rift thesis, the end of the cold war and new inter-Korean engagement (epitomized by the 2000 Korea summit) brought important changes in how South Koreans viewed the North and, consequently, the U.S. role in their national defense. From the U.S. perspective, the September 11 attacks changed the landscape of national security policy, placing even greater emphasis on nonproliferation. As such, the United States regarded North Korea as a serious regional and even global security threat, whereas many South Koreans came to perceive the North—now a partner in inter-Korean reconciliation—as a weak state with severely diminished capacity to threaten ROK national security.²⁴ Thus, the traditional allies no longer

viewed the North Korean nuclear issue through the same lens, and this difference allegedly strained the alliance. Divergent views and approaches to the North Korean issue posed a fundamental challenge to the U.S.-ROK alliance, as experts of international relations held that alliances must rest on a congruence of strategic interests and a willingness to share risks and costs.²⁵

In more specific terms, the policy rift thesis maintains that it was the conflict between progressive Korean governments and a conservative U.S. administration over North Korea that strained the alliance. Upon entering office, President Bush demonstrated a decided reluctance to engage the North and readily expressed skepticism over South Korea's Sunshine Policy, most notably during President Kim Dae Jung's visit to the White House in the spring of 2001. The new U.S. administration's characterizations of North Korea—first as part of an “axis of evil” and later as an “outpost of tyranny”—angered not only North Koreans but also many in the South, creating noticeable tension at the policy level. By early 2002, even *before* the beginning of the current nuclear standoff, the U.S. media began to report on a growing policy rift between the once-close allies. Whereas North Korea had earlier stood as the threat that necessitated and galvanized cooperation in the alliance, very different perceptions and policy approaches toward the regime now tested U.S.-ROK relations.

Both theses make many valid points, and they are not mutually exclusive. Yet a series of unanswered questions remain.

First, a more complete answer is needed to the question of why only *recent* anti-Americanism, and not past spikes in such sentiment, has had a significant impact on the alliance. Anti-American sentiment and movements in the South were more widespread and violent in the 1980s but had little, if any, jeopardizing effect on the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Second, the question remains why there was no anti-Koreanism in the United States comparable to the anti-Americanism that appeared in South Korea. As noted earlier, U.S. policy makers and experts in Korean affairs have voiced their concern over tension in the alliance, but no broad anti-Koreanism can be found in the American public.

Third, in a related vein, some explanation is needed for why the alliance has become a subject of intense debate within South Korea, whereas no comparable contention has appeared within the United States. In other words, why was the Korean debate over the purpose and terms of the alliance more widespread and intense, while American examinations of these issues were limited in scope and largely confined to academic and policy circles?

Fourth, the reason for the alliance becoming a subject of concern in the United States only in recent years, when its rationale has been challenged by Korean progressives over a much longer period, needs to be addressed. Why have Koreans, not Americans, led the questioning and even the challenging of this enduring, decades-old relationship?

The final question to be addressed is whether the U.S.-ROK relationship can dispel the label of being “strained” and once again be characterized by robust cooperation. The anti-Americanism thesis suggests this can happen once anti-American sentiment has dissipated. The policy rift thesis, on the other hand, asserts that cooperation can be restored once congruous U.S.-ROK perceptions of the North have been established and/or the North Korean nuclear issue has been resolved.

In sum, neither the anti-Americanism thesis nor the policy rift thesis sufficiently addresses these critical questions; both have limited explanatory power. Instead, the answers must come from a careful examination of the ways in which Koreans and Americans view U.S.-ROK relations, because, as mentioned earlier, they appear to employ different lenses, or frameworks, in understanding the relationship. That is, not only should the examination address how Koreans and Americans have assessed their bilateral relationship over time, but, more importantly, it must also discern the conceptual frameworks wherein such assessments have been made. If there is strong evidence that Koreans and Americans indeed utilize different frameworks, then an explanation must be provided as to why. Doing so must involve a nuanced examination of sentiment, conceptually separating that which is critical of the other country from that which is critical of the bilateral relationship or the alliance.

This study examines changing U.S.-ROK relations in the context of American and South Korean views about each other, their bilateral relationship, and the DPRK, as recorded through the print media from 1992 to 2003. The study is based on the premises that perceptions matter in international relations and that the news media offer insights into the influence of perception.

Identity Versus Policy in the U.S.-ROK Relationship

Although the U.S.-ROK relationship has become more comprehensive over the years, a military alliance still forms its core. Alliance formation is a critical tool in international politics, and nations establish alliances to increase their security by merging their capabilities against a common enemy.