The ROK-U.S. alliance has now entered a crucial period in dealing with North Korean nuclear issues. At the same time, the alliance has been responding to the impact of a transformed international environment and South Korea’s democratization. One result of these changes is the rising importance of both political leadership and public opinion as developments that influence the effectiveness and viability of the alliance.

Public opinion polls show that South Korea’s security policy toward the United States remains the basic concern of the South Korean public. Because South Korean views on foreign policy have developed in the context of the ROK-U.S. security system, it is not surprising that South Korean attitudes toward North Korea remain closely associated with their beliefs toward ROK-U.S. relations.

Some recent assessments of South Korean public opinion concerning the ROK-U.S. relationship appear to have overestimated the extent of hostility in the bilateral relationship. For instance, a 2008 JoongAng Ilbo poll shows that only 23% of South Koreans believe that current ROK-U.S. relations are favorable, the lowest score since 1978.

My analysis of public opinion data from a survey conducted by the Seoul-based East Asia Institute in June 2008 shows that South Korean support for the ROK-U.S. security system has persisted despite changes in the international environment, domestic transitions in both South Korea and the United States, strains in bilateral relations, and even a host of economic troubles.

The June 2008 survey shows that 64.5% of respondents support the concept of “strategic flexibility” for U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), while only 33.5% of respondents thought that the only role of USFK is to deter North Korea. There was even stronger public support for the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA), with 75.4% supporting the FTA while 22.3% of those surveyed oppose the FTA. The survey also shows that a majority of Koreans surveyed have positive feelings about the United States, with 59.7% of respondents indicating that they have a great deal or fair amount of favorable feeling toward the United States while 15.1% indicated that they have little or no favorable feeling toward the United States. These numbers suggest that South Korean “pro-alliance” support for the political-military, economic, and emotional aspects of the ROK-U.S. relationship is significantly larger than the “anti-alliance” camp within South Korean society. (See Figure 1.)

My additional statistical analysis of this polling data shows that positive South Korean views of the ROK-U.S. alliance are strongly associated with their perceptions of North Korea’s military threat and development of nuclear capabilities. Alliance supporters are dissatisfied with North Korea’s approach to dealing with nuclear issues and are more inclined to perceive North Korea as a definite threat to peninsular and regional stability. Their optimistic evaluation of inter-Korean relations reflects a pragmatic posture that comes from their appreciation of the ROK-U.S. alliance.

South Koreans who identify with the United States and have confidence in USFK’s strategic flexibility are more apt to
think of North Korea’s nuclear development as undesirable. There is a clear relationship between South Korean appreciation of the bilateral alliance and their expectations for cooperation on North Korean issues. Likewise, those who support the regional role of the U.S. in handling the North Korean security threat have more trust in U.S. contributions to South Korea’s defense. The notion that anti-Americanism in South Korean society has evolved with domestic political change should thus be reconsidered.

Public appreciation of the ROK-U.S. alliance enables individual South Koreans to assess bilateral political or military issues in a coherent way. Among South Korean people, there is overall recognition that a secure and stable South Korea is in the U.S. interest and likewise a secure and stable U.S. benefits South Korea. Yet South Korean commitment to USFK’s expanded role should not be exaggerated. Pro-alliance South Koreans who seem to endorse the expanded role of USFK have no desire to see South Korea challenge the United States.

The majority of South Koreans consider ROK-U.S. relations to be the most important partnership in addressing inter-Korean relations. Likewise, most South Koreans see the ROK-U.S. alliance framework as the most realistic tool for dealing with North Korean military and nuclear threats. South Korean approaches to the bilateral alliance have evolved incrementally and rationally as a result of the North Korean military threat and changes in the international system.

During his first visit to Washington in April 2008, President Lee Myung-bak presented three core components for the ROK-U.S. strategic alliance: values, trust, and peace. My analysis of the survey data presented here suggests that these three components are gaining sufficient support from the South Korean public.

As South Korea, the United States, and Japan attempt to strengthen UN sanctions and the isolation of North Korea, Pyongyang is expected to maintain its tough stance following its second nuclear test. In order to secure the continued success of the ROK-U.S. alliance, ROK-U.S. relations should develop based on continued public support for shared political, military, economic and cultural interests. Both countries should remain committed to the bilateral alliance in the face of regional and North Korean nuclear challenges. South Korean policy makers should always keep track of the public’s appreciation and support of the ROK-U.S. alliance. By doing so, policy makers can transform the alliance system while maintaining strong public support.

Gon Namkung is a Professor at Ewha Woman’s University. This opinion column was extracted from a longer academic paper presented at a conference on “Emerging Issues of North Korean Foreign Policy” held at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada on June 25-26, 2009.

**NEWS & EVENTS**

**AUGUST 17-21 – KOREAN GLOBAL FORUM, SEOUL, KOREA**

**10TH WORLD KOREAN FORUM**
The Korean Global Foundation will hold its “World Korean Forum,” an annual international forum that explores Korean peninsula issues including peace and reunification, prosperity, and global exchange. Scott Snyder, Director of the Center for U.S.-Korea Policy will speak on the foreign policy of the Obama administration. Details of this year’s 10th anniversary event “The New Era of Unified Korea & World” are available at [www.koreanglobalfoundation.org](http://www.koreanglobalfoundation.org).

**JULY 26-28 – CSIS PACIFIC FORUM, MAUI, HI**

**U.S.-ROK STRATEGIC DIALOGUE**
This meeting will bring together Korean and U.S. experts and officials to share perspectives on pressing strategic issues and their impact on the U.S.-ROK alliance. Details are available at [http://csis.org/event/us-rok-strategic-dialogue](http://csis.org/event/us-rok-strategic-dialogue).

**JULY 14 – CATO INSTITUTE, WASHINGTON D.C.**

**ENGAGING CHINA TO SOLVE THE NORTH KOREA PROBLEM**
This policy forum will address China’s role in negotiating with North Korea. Participants will include Ted Galen Carpenter, Vice President for Defense and Foreign Policy Studies, Cato Institute; Scott Snyder, Director of the Center for U.S.-Korea
JULY 9 – KEI, WASHINGTON, DC
WHAT IF NORTH KOREA SAYS NO?: MEDIUM-TO-LONG TERM STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR THE OTHER FIVE PARTIES

The Atlantic Council and Korea Economic Institute will host a discussion on the policy options open to the United States, China, and South Korea should North Korea not return to the talks, and the implications for peace, security, and nonproliferation in the region. Speakers will include Alan Romberg, Henry L. Stimson Center; Scott Snyder, The Asia Foundation; and Muthiah Alagappa, East-West Center. Troy Stangarone, KEI, will moderate the discussion. Details are available at www.keia.org.

PUBLICATIONS


Scott Snyder (June 17, 2009), “Strengthening South Korean Ties,” Interview with Council on Foreign Relations.

Scott Snyder (June 17, 2009), “North Korea’s Nuclear and Missile Tests and Six-Party Talks: Where Do We Go From Here?” Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and the Global Environment, and Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade.


For a complete list of publications, please visit: www.centerforuskoreapolicy.org

VIEWS ON THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

“South Korea’s military is fully prepared to deal with any threats and provocations by the North, based on a strong joint defense alliance with the U.S.”

—Joint Chiefs of Staff statement on North Korea’s missile tests, July 4, 2009.

“The summit meeting on June 16 between Presidents Lee Myung-bak and Barack Obama marked the turning point where those two allies will be working on ‘real peace,’ not ‘declaratory peace’ on the Korean Peninsula.”


“The Republic of Korea is one of America’s closest allies. Our friendship has been forged through a history of shared sacrifice, and is anchored in our shared democratic values.”


“For the last 60 years since the Korean War, our relationship has been one of a strong security alliance and a partnership. Now, the future in this new era is about not only strengthening our mutual partnership but also working together side by side to tackle issues of global concern.”


“Diplomatic outreach will remain possible if North Korea shows an interest in abiding by its international obligations and improving its relations with the outside world…The choices for the future are North Korea’s.”

The Center for U.S.-Korea Policy aims to deepen and broaden the foundations for institutionalized cooperation between the United States and South Korea by promoting bilateral policy coordination. A project of The Asia Foundation, the Center is based in the Foundation’s Washington, DC office. The Center supports the Foundation’s commitment to the development of the Asia Pacific by supporting a comprehensive U.S.-ROK alliance partnership on emerging global, regional, and non-traditional security challenges.

The Asia Foundation is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to the development of a peaceful, prosperous, just, and open Asia-Pacific region. Drawing on more than 50 years of experience in Asia, the Foundation collaborates with private and public partners to support leadership and institutional development, exchanges, and policy research.

The Center for U.S.-Korea Policy is based in the Washington DC office of The Asia Foundation with seed funding from the Smith Richardson Foundation. The Center accepts donations from the public and private sector for its programs and operations. Inquiries should be directed to Scott Snyder at ssnyder@centerforuskoreapolicy.org.

This newsletter is produced by the Center for U.S.-Korea Policy to provide updates and analysis on current policy issues related to the U.S.-ROK alliance partnership. All views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s). To be added to the newsletter listserve, please contact info@centerforuskoreapolicy.org.