In November 2002, five months after a tragic accident in which a U.S. military vehicle ran over two Korean schoolgirls, Ambassador Thomas Hubbard made an official apology on behalf of President Bush: “Just this morning, the president sent me a message asking me to convey his apologies to the families of the girls, to the government of the Republic of Korea and to the people of Korea.” A half dozen years later, pressured by vehement public protests against the importation of U.S. beef amid fears of mad cow disease, the four-month old Lee Myung-bak government—despite contravening an agreement with President Bush—demanded that the U.S. not export beef to Korea from cattle more than 30 months old. Concerned by the potential impact on the U.S.-ROK alliance, the Bush administration reluctantly accepted the Korean demand. These two cases clearly illustrate that the U.S.-ROK alliance has evolved from a typical patron-client relationship to a relationship in which South Korea has emerged as a former client now able to make demands on its patron and actually see such demands materialized.

It is important to note that in both cases the ROK media played a key role in shaping policy decisions. At the time of the military accident, the schoolgirl deaths received only secondary coverage; the major news stories were the Korea-Japan World Cup and the resolution of an accidental clash with the North Korean navy. Soon after, however, the incident aroused a media frenzy that sparked what would be regarded as “the strongest display of anti-Americanism in South Korean history.” South Korea’s newly established progressive online newspaper OhmyNews led the charge, primarily aimed at U.S. military presence on the peninsula. In the case of the beef protests, the television network MBC brought the issue to the forefront of public awareness by making mad cow disease the focus of one of its primetime news programs. While several of its claims were disputed, the program’s central theme was a broad accusation that Korean policy makers had been overly beholden to American demands and had felt compelled to sacrifice a degree of national sovereignty over the domestic market and even potentially harm the health of Korean citizens.

The U.S.-ROK alliance displays contrasting levels of asymmetry in power and attention. As for power asymmetry, without doubt, the U.S. maintains dominance over South Korea in economic and military terms. However, in terms of attention, especially in media attention to the alliance, South Korea has a clear edge.

According to my recent study (One Alliance, Two Lenses: U.S.-Korea Relations in a New Era, Stanford University Press, 2010), the disparity in media coverage of the bilateral relationship is stark. On average, the Korean newspapers I surveyed published four times as many articles about U.S.-ROK relations as the U.S. newspapers did over the study years (1994-2003). Even more dramatic, my study showed that the Korean newspapers published 56 times more editorials and columns on U.S.-ROK relations than the U.S. newspapers. While the relationship became a major subject of debate in Korea, it did not receive much attention in the U.S. media beyond mere descriptive coverage.
The disparity in media coverage is apparent in the two aforementioned cases. South Korea’s progressive Hankyoreh and conservative Chosun Ilbo newspapers each published over 200 articles on the military accident, which in contrast received scant attention in the U.S. (none of the three U.S. dailies published more than 20 articles). The same disparity is also apparent in the beef protests. My search for the term “Korean beef protest” in the three U.S. dailies yielded counts all under 50. Conversely, both Korean newspapers published nearly ten times as many articles as the highest frequency in a U.S. paper. It is not reaching too far to assume that such an attention gap between the two nations exercised some sort of significant influence on the U.S. decisions to concede on both issues.

The different levels of attention to the alliance largely stem from differing national perceptions of the alliance. While the United States plays an important role in ROK security, and seeing American troops stationed on the peninsula is a feature of daily life for many Koreans, the ROK does not guarantee U.S. security, and the alliance rarely touches the lives of average Americans. In its alliance with South Korea, the U.S. has less risk but also less opportunity in the relationship and therefore media coverage of events affecting the alliance is much less extensive. On the other hand, South Korea has much more at stake in the relationship as a central part of its foreign policy agenda, and so it accords much more attention to the alliance.

The asymmetry in media attention thus significantly affects the bilateral relationship. Besides providing readers with factual information on key events and issues, news coverage casts the spotlight of public attention on previously obscure or undisputed issues. Indeed, as David Straub, a senior official at the U.S. embassy in Seoul during the schoolgirl accident, points out, South Korea is able to frame issues and set the agenda “for the bilateral relationship to a significant degree, despite the United States’ being the more powerful player.” Recognizing the significance of this asymmetrical attention is crucial to analyzing contemporary dynamics within the U.S.-ROK alliance.

More attention, however, does not necessarily mean a more coherent understanding of the issues at stake. While the U.S. media “underplayed” much of the 2002 schoolgirl tragedy and 2008 beef protests, the South Korean media was accused of “exaggerating its risks and opportunities” in both situations. To be sure, there is a great potential of harming the alliance when excessive media attention is ideologically motivated or based on distorted information, which was likely in the Korean cases. Regardless of media bias, however, the perceived “insensitivity” on the part of the United States resulted in public resentment in South Korea, which eventually forced a U.S. concession.

As such, understanding the U.S.-ROK alliance can no longer be based primarily on a realist analysis of power and security. An asymmetry in media attention to the alliance has altered the terms of reference such that the “power gap” is no longer the defining attribute of the alliance structure. This has added significance in Korea where the media is a key player in alliance politics, a fact of which U.S. policy makers must be ever sensitive.

Gi-Wook Shin is Director of The Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center (APARC); Director of the Korean Studies Program; and the Tong Yang, Korea Foundation, and Korea Stanford Alumni Chair of Korean Studies at Stanford University. He is Professor of Sociology and Senior Fellow of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI). Dr. Shin will speak at a conference on media influences on U.S.-Korea relations hosted by The Asia Foundation Korea Office in Seoul on June 28, 2010.

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**NEWS & EVENTS**

**JUNE 30-JULY 1, 2010 – CENTER FOR U.S.-KOREA POLICY, KOREAN ECONOMIC ASSOCIATION, KOREAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION – WASHINGTON DC**

**RECASTING THE KOREAN MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT: ISSUES, DEBATES, AND LESSONS**

*Willard InterContinental, 1401 Pennsylvania Ave, B1 Ballroom*

The Asia Foundation’s Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, Korean Economic Association, and Korean Political Science Association will co-host a public forum on the Korean development model. This two-day conference will convene distinguished international experts to explore various aspects of the South Korean development experience as a market economy and democracy. **To RSVP please contact jcho@asiafound.org with name and affiliation.**

**JUNE 28, 2010 – THE ASIA FOUNDATION – SEOUL, KOREA**

**THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA ON U.S.-KOREA RELATIONS AND FUTURE OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA**

*9:30am-5pm, Korea Chamber of Commerce & Industry Building, Mid-Conference Room B*

The Asia Foundation Korea Office will hold a public policy forum in Seoul on the influence of media on U.S.-Korea relations. Confirmed speakers include Shin Gi-wook, Stanford University; Barbara Demick, LA Times, and other experts and journalists. This conference is supported by the Korean-American Association and Friends of The Asia Foundation/Korea. **To RSVP please contact csmoon@asiafound.org with name and affiliation.**
JUNE 24-25, 2010 – UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA – LOS ANGELES, CA
LEGACY AND LESSONS OF THE KOREAN WAR
University of Southern California, University Park Campus, Davidson Conference Center, Vineyard Hall
This 25th annual conference is sponsored by USC’s Korean Studies Institute, the Council on U.S.-Korean Security Studies, the International Council on Korean Studies, the 60th Anniversary of the Korean War Commemoration Committee, the Korea Institute for Maritime Strategy, and The Dong-A Daily News. Scott Snyder, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy Director, will serve as a panelist.

JUNE 4-5, 2010 – UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA – VIENNA, AUSTRIA
KOREA AND EAST ASIA: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND OPTIONS FOR A REGIONAL COLLECTIVE SECURITY MECHANISM
Alois-Wagner-Seal, ÖFSE-Center, Sensengasse 3
The University of Vienna convened the second meeting of its Korea and East Asia Conference Series, on Korea and East Asian regional security cooperation. Scott Snyder, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy Director, presented a paper on the East Asian Community as a model of collective security.

PUBLICATIONS


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

VIEWS ON THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

“The North’s military provocation against the Cheonan on March 26 violated the Charter of the United Nations and contravened the existing agreements reached for the sake of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, including the Korean War Armistice Agreement and the Basic Agreement between South and North Korea.”

--President Lee Myung-bak, Special Address to the Nation, May 24, 2010, Seoul.

“President Obama fully supports President Lee in his handling of the ROK Cheonan incident and the objective investigation that followed. The measures that the government of the Republic of Korea announced today are called for and entirely appropriate. The Republic of Korea can continue to count on the full support of the United States.”


“What is most important at this delicate moment is our efforts to show solidarity for the Korea-U.S. alliance...The Korea-U.S. alliance along with the U.S.-Japan alliance is the fundamental foundation on which peace and stability of the Peninsula and the Northeast Asia are maintained.”


“The Chinese recognize the gravity of the situation we face. The Chinese understand the reaction by the South Koreans, and they also understand our unique responsibility for the peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.”

--Hillary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State, Briefing on the Republic of Korea, May 24, 2010, Beijing.
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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 a comprehensive U.S.-ROK alliance partnership on emerging global, regional, and non-traditional security challenges. A project of The Asia Foundation, the Center is based in the Foundation’s Washington DC office.

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 50 years of experience in Asia, the Foundation collaborates with private and public partners to support leadership and institutional development, exchanges, and policy research.

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).

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