The health of any bilateral relationship is ultimately grounded in the support of domestic constituencies, a fact that is well recognized in the U.S.-South Korean case. Often, this consensus is focused on the hope that the South Korean public might come to more strongly value the alliance and become less prone to unrest on issues that create frictions. But Korea watchers are increasingly noting that what the American public thinks is also important to the health of bilateral relations. In particular, an educated public should ideally be a valued voice in the discussion around how to adapt the U.S.-South Korean partnership to the 21st-century environment. Against the backdrop of a shifting Asian security and economic landscape, South Korea’s arrival as a middle power, and the potential for long-term constraints on U.S. power projection, the dialogue on this adaptation is underway at the elite level. Although many of the changes being discussed will never register on most American citizens’ radar, some, especially regarding U.S. troop presence, could feature public input.

What the American public knows and thinks about the Korean peninsula plays not just into long-term strategy, but can provide a rudder for keeping the relationship on keel during moments of crisis. In particular, a stronger base level of understanding of the United States’ historical and contemporary connection to Korea, and of South Korea itself, could mean the difference between manageable frictions and serious turbulence when differences arise in the relationship. The pitfalls of an under-informed public were illustrated by the fallout from the 2002 accident in which two Korean girls were killed by a U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) military vehicle: Anti-American protests, flag burnings, and attacks on U.S. civilians and servicemen in Seoul disappointed and angered Americans, whose limited contextual understanding opened the door for a magnified negative impact on American perceptions of Korea and for potentially damaging reactions on a popular level and from Capitol Hill.

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1 For example, see “‘New Beginnings’ in the U.S.-ROK Alliance: Recommendations to Policymakers,” Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University and The Korea Society, April 2008.

2 For example, Victor D. Cha and Katrin Katz say that “while the alliance is strong at the policy elite level, the question remains about how deeply rooted this relationship is among the general public.” “Report on U.S. Attitudes toward the Republic of Korea,” The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, September 16, 2010.


The role of the media as a stakeholder in the U.S.-South Korea alliance is central because it is the primary means by which the real grassroots stakeholders—the American and South Korean publics—are educated about each other’s countries and about the bilateral relationship. It is through the media, rather than first-hand, that American citizens identify priority issues within the alliance, learn about the views of Korean policymakers, and take away a sense of how developments in South Korea affect American interests. Alliance capacity and the ability of the alliance to adapt are impacted significantly by public opinion, even if not to the degree that this is the case in South Korea.

Nonetheless, it becomes immediately clear that the U.S. and Korean medias do not play parallel roles in their respective countries when it comes to the alliance. As Gi-Wook Shin has detailed, Korean newspapers afford much more attention to the United States and bilateral issues than do U.S. newspapers to Korea-related topics. And coverage of the alliance in Korean media is characterized by much greater ideological polarization than in the U.S. media, making the Korean media a space in which heated debates about the relationship have played out between conservative and progressive forces in the country. In contrast, U.S. newspapers devote little space to Korean peninsula-related issues, reflecting the breadth and depth of U.S. interests and activities overseas, currently including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; the shrinking “news hole,” as described later; and the general stability of U.S.-ROK relations and South Korea itself. Furthermore, only a tiny percentage of those articles focus on U.S.-South Korea relations. The process by which the media influences public opinion and U.S. foreign policy toward South Korea is thereby sharply reduced compared to the function of the Korean media.

This paper first distills the most current scholarly literature on the relationship between the media and U.S. foreign policy. It then looks at the past two years of U.S. newspaper coverage of Korea, comparing the data for 2008 and 2009 to Shin’s earlier period of study (June 1992 to January 2004) to identify notable changes in the nature of coverage since that time. Key events and issues are selected for further analysis and to draw conclusions about the interplay of the media, public opinion, leadership agendas, and the health of the bilateral relationship in the late years of the decade just ended. Television news coverage and the impact of the “new media” with respect to Korea coverage receive brief treatment.

**U.S. Foreign Policy and the Media**

The question of what role the media plays in American foreign policy is a complex one with a diverse, interdisciplinary literature that eludes consensus. Does the media impact policymaking by shaping citizen opinions, or by serving as the medium for elite debate? Is the media a proactive, strategic actor, or more akin to a conduit for elite messages? And in any case, can the public competently form opinions regarding foreign policy, or meaningfully influence its formation?

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A recent effort to synthesize the literature provides a useful departure point for considering the case of the two Koreas in U.S. reporting.\(^6\) Previously, research on this topic had exhaustively treated the various bi-nodal causal relationships at work, for example those between the media and the public, events and the media, the leadership and the public, or the leadership and the media. Baum and Potter’s study instead presents the concept of a “foreign policy marketplace” in which information is the key commodity traded among leaders, the public, and the media. This dynamic framework is arguably a more comprehensive illustration of the multifaceted and circular interactions involved. Following the analogy to economic markets further, the authors propose that there is, for any time regarding a particular issue, an equilibrium in the distribution of information among the three parties. The crux of the model is that the media “play the crucial role of collecting, framing, and distributing information—the key market commodity.”

A key characteristic of Baum and Potter’s model and others is that leaders have a clear information advantage vis-à-vis the public, particularly in the foreign affairs arena, where it is agreed that public attention is typically low.\(^7\) To compensate, the public often mitigates this disadvantage by relying on elite positions, as conveyed by the media, as a cognitive shortcut in forming its opinions. At the same time, the authors conclude, the mass media is best characterized as a discrete strategic actor whose framing of elite messages in news stories has an causal effect on public perception and ultimately foreign policy. Complicating matters, however, is that leaders themselves frequently rely on this same media to inform themselves of important emerging events, and consult major newspapers for both factual information as well as informed opinion.

The utility of the “foreign policy marketplace” concept is that it allows us to ask several questions that will illuminate the U.S. media’s influence on the U.S.-Korea relationship: What is the market equilibrium with respect to information about the Koreas? How can the corresponding role of the media in the bilateral relationship be characterized? What circumstances could alter the equilibrium such that the media and the public apply greater pressure on the administration and the Congress with respect to Korea policy? After presenting an analysis of print, television, and new media coverage of the Koreas in the United States, this paper’s conclusion offers preliminary answers to these questions.

**Industry Structural Challenges and Foreign Affairs Reporting**

An ongoing structural transformation of the media industry, driven by technological and communication advances, has changed the way Americans consume both domestic and foreign affairs news. These shifts, it is well known, have not been kind to newspapers, which have seen a precipitous drop in advertising, shrinking readerships and profit margins, competition from new media, industry consolidation, and layoffs. The recession has made the structural challenges faced by newspapers devastatingly acute. Total daily newspaper circulation dropped 2.3 million in 2009,\(^8\) to levels not seen since the 1940s.\(^9\) Newspaper advertising revenues, including online

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\(^7\) Baum and Potter, 2008: 42-43.

\(^8\) Editor & Publisher International Yearbook, 2010.
advertising, dropped 27 percent between 2008 and 2009, leaving them below 1987 levels—and advertising traditionally supplies 80 percent of a newspaper’s revenues.\(^9\) 15,866 newspaper industry employees lost their jobs in 2008.\(^10\) These declines represent an acceleration of negative trends compared to the previous several years, and many newspapers are sustaining significant operating losses. Financial troubles have led newspapers to downsize or close many foreign bureaus; the logic of such cuts becomes starkly clear when one considers that the foreign desk of the \textit{New York Times} consumes a third of the newspaper’s annual budget of $60-$70 million.\(^11\)

The result has been a shrinking “news hole”—the amount of print space available for news content—particularly for foreign affairs reporting. As a simple matter of physics, choices of what to cover and print have become more constrained. Martin Fackler of the \textit{New York Times} writes in \textit{First Drafts of Korea} that the \textit{Times} and \textit{Wall Street Journal} have turned to reduction of the number of pages, and in some cases page size, as a way to cut costs.\(^12\) Journalist Karl Schoenberger’s contribution to \textit{First Drafts} details the impact of some of these developments in terms of deteriorating foreign journalism. He notes a decrease in general news coverage to make way for relatively greater business news coverage, and describes an overall decline in the qualifications of foreign correspondents, who in addition to being fewer in number, increasingly lack deep country expertise and language capability. “Ignorance about places like South Korea, \textit{both in the press corps and in the public}, is on the rise,” Schoenberger concludes [emphasis added].\(^13\) What is occurring, then, is not just a quantitative decline in foreign coverage, but a potential quality decline too.

The industry’s transformation is also marked by positive developments—or at least more benign ones. A proliferation of country- and issue-specific electronic news digests and listservs, made-to-order article feeds, and blogs from a variety of perspectives and locations, as well as easier access to foreign news publications, amount to an extremely rich array of sources for those who watch the peninsula closely. Wire services have actually expanded to fill some of the gaps that have emerged: The \textit{Associated Press} has added more in-depth content to complement its traditional strength in breaking news,\(^14\) and the organization’s presence in the region eclipses that of traditional newspapers’, with over 300 locations globally and 3,700 employees, two-thirds of them categorized as “newsgatherers.”\(^15\) And according to former \textit{Washington Post} foreign and national editor Peter Osnos, nonprofit media might play an important role in the future

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\(^10\) Ibid.

\(^11\) Editor & Publisher International Yearbook, 2009.


constitution of foreign affairs news coverage: He notes that NPR has more foreign correspondents than all the broadcast networks combined.\textsuperscript{17}

But the general public—those who are not policymakers and don’t have a particular reason to seek out Korea-specific news—continue to learn about South Korea through the mainstream media, by way of newspapers (both in print and online) and television news. As John Schidlovsky, director of the International Reporting Project at Johns Hopkins University, asks, “How many general readers actually spend time looking for news about Turkey or Botswana or Peru? Most people don’t know how to find it or don’t take the time to…. The mainstream news organizations still have an obligation to educate the public about important international news.”\textsuperscript{18}

And despite declining circulation, there are still about 46 million daily newspaper readers in the United States.\textsuperscript{19} It’s worth noting, too, that one-third of all Internet users regularly view newspaper websites.\textsuperscript{20} So although the business model may be in crisis, the content of major newspapers is indeed being widely consumed, making analysis of foreign coverage in U.S. newspapers very relevant as we examine the media for its influence on relations with South Korea.

**American Media Coverage of Korea, 2008-2009**

**Mainstream Newspapers**

**Methodology**

The quantitative portion of this study draws its methodology largely from Gi-Wook Shin’s study spanning 1992-2004 and therefore offers some useful comparisons to that earlier period. This effort is more limited than Shin’s in two important ways: I am only examining the U.S. media, and time and labor constraints precluded an assessment of the “tone” of coverage. Borrowing from Shin, the newspapers selected for analysis were the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*. The *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* are respectively the first and third largest U.S. newspapers by circulation, with the *Washington Post* in fifth but having unique impact because of its location and its authoritative foreign affairs coverage.\textsuperscript{21} As Shin notes, the *Times* is the most influential of these and frequently sets the agenda for international coverage by other U.S. outlets, and inclusion of the *Wall Street Journal* helps to balance the study in terms of ideological orientation of sources and representation of economic and financial news. Updated circulation data for the three selected newspapers is listed in Table 1.


\textsuperscript{19} Editor and Publisher International Yearbook, 2010.


\textsuperscript{21} Circulation numbers as of September 30, 2008. Editor & Publisher International Yearbook, 2009.
Table 1. Circulation Data for Selected U.S. Newspapers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Circulation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wall Street Journal</td>
<td>2,011,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Times</td>
<td>927,851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>582,844</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*2010 Editor & Publisher International Yearbook. Data is from September 2009.*

The volume of Korea-related articles from each publication was tallied for every year from 1992-2009 in order to better discern spikes in coverage from 2004-2009. More detailed, headline-based analysis was performed on all articles from 2008 and 2009. The data set was constructed by selecting all articles from 2008 and 2009 that included the word “Korea,” “Seoul,” or “Pyongyang” in the headline, following Shin’s determination that expanding the parameters to include articles whose text mentioned those words would result in an unmanageably large data set containing a large portion of irrelevant news stories. *New York Times* and *Washington Post* articles were culled from the LexisNexis database, and *Wall Street Journal* articles were culled from ProQuest.

Articles were assigned a geographic category: ROK, DPRK, U.S.-ROK, U.S.-DPRK, or ROK-DPRK. The resulting statistics were compared with Shin’s for the previous period to draw conclusions about trends in the amount of reporting on the bilateral relationship; to determine the changing proportions of U.S. coverage devoted to bilateral relations versus to South Korea itself; and to identify months for U.S. media attention to the alliance. “ROK” and “U.S.-ROK” articles received further attention and were divided into political, economic, and security articles, allowing for additional comparisons to Shin’s earlier data and for findings about the changing proportions of coverage of each topic within both the “ROK” and “U.S.-ROK” data subsets. Additional qualitative assessments of coverage in 2008 and 2009 centered on important events or issues as appropriate and were evaluated in the context of public opinion and administration priorities.

Quantitative findings and comparisons with earlier period of coverage
Figure 2 illustrates the volume of Korea coverage in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* from 1992-2009. Spikes in coverage like those in 1995 (a peak Shin attributed to fallout from the first North Korean nuclear crisis, indictments of former authoritarian presidents, and political scandals) and 2002-2003 (attributed primarily to the second nuclear crisis) have not been seen in any years since then. The years 2008 and 2009 are close to the average for the entire eighteen-year span, despite the clear pickup in 2009, so the analysis that follows represents a period of relatively flat coverage. Table 2 summarizes the principal data set, which totaled 922 articles from the three newspapers for 2008 and 2009.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>Total Articles 2008-9</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Table 2: Articles containing “Korea,” “Seoul,” or “Pyongyang” in the headline.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>New York Times</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Times</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>109</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wall Street Journal</td>
<td>144</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Times</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wall Street Journal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Articles 2008-9</td>
<td><strong>922</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The phenomenon of North Korea-related reports dominating news coverage of the peninsula was more acute in 2008 and 2009 than in the previous study for 1992-2004. Additional reporting on North Korea came largely came at the expense of reporting on the ROK itself, as shown in Table 3, but the percentage of articles on the U.S.-ROK relationship was also lower. This was largely due to a spike in DPRK-related articles in 2009, when they amounted to 74 percent of U.S.
coverage of the peninsula amidst particularly rocky North-South tensions, the April rocket launch and associated UN activity, the detention of American journalists Laura Ling and Euna Lee and later a U.S. missionary, and trips by Bill Clinton and Stephen Bosworth to Pyongyang. The preferences of editors, journalists, and newspaper consumers had shifted farther away from news about bilateral relations and domestic South Korean issues in favor of reports about the drama surrounding North Korea.

Furthermore, the gap between coverage of the U.S.-ROK relationship vis-à-vis South Korea itself persisted in nearly the exact proportions as in the previous period, with only 68 articles on the former throughout 2008-2009 and 253 on domestic South Korean issues. The disparity confirms continuing inattention to bilateral relations despite the heft of the military partnership, the substantial U.S. troop presence, and South Korea’s standing as the United States’ seventh-largest trading partner. It also leaves the American public under-informed relative to what some Korea watchers might hope, though the absence of frictions significant enough to drive spikes in attention is of course welcome and might be considered a luxury by alliance managers busy navigating Korean public opinion.

The data for articles about South Korea show stagnancy in the proportions of articles devoted to various topic categories, as shown in Table 4. The economics and trade category, led by Wall Street Journal reporting on business, finance, and macroeconomics, continued to dominate what Americans read about South Korea in the news. Coverage of domestic Korean politics remained unchanged at 15 percent of the total, despite the beef protests and related political upheaval. From the perspective of American audiences, the story of South Korea’s political evolution and democratic consolidation is one that is largely over; the volume of coverage of ROK politics will not likely return to the levels seen when stories about South Koreans’ struggles against authoritarianism and human rights abuses abounded.

Table 3. Focus of news articles on the Korean peninsula: Comparison with earlier period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ROK and U.S.-ROK relations</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROK</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.-ROK</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPRK, U.S.-DPRK relations, and ROK-DPRK relations</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

22 However, a significant number of articles relating to beef protests were coded as U.S.-ROK articles and/or as articles about economics and trade, in accordance with their focus.
Table 4: Topics of focus in U.S. newspaper articles on South Korea and U.S.-ROK relations: Comparison with earlier period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ROK</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics/Trade</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROK politics</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Diplomacy</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U.S.-ROK</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics/Trade</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Diplomacy</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, shifts are evident within the set of articles about U.S.-ROK relations: Reporting on bilateral economic and trade issues rose to over half of the total coverage for 2008-2009, while reporting on security dropped even further to 21 percent, totaling a mere 14 articles across all three newspapers.\(^{23}\) The first of these shifts is entirely attributable to the trade dispute over beef and efforts by both administrations to save the Korea-U.S. free trade agreement (KORUS FTA)—almost none of the articles concerned were about other economic issues, and coverage nearly disappeared entirely in 2009, when Obama assumed office and the ongoing recession evaporated prospects for near-term implementation of the trade deal. But the mere handful of security-related articles that appeared in these influential newspapers over the past two years drives home the fact that the U.S. media is almost mute on core alliance politics. Debates on the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) between high-level officials and within Korea received no attention by these newspapers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such issues are obscure to nearly all Americans not involved in U.S. foreign policy toward the peninsula, and remain primarily the domain of alliance managers in the Pentagon. For the broader U.S. public that receives its foreign affairs information almost entirely from mainstream news outlets, newspapers today present South Korea primarily in terms of its economic importance.

**Newspaper coverage of selected events and issues**

2008 and 2009 saw important developments in U.S.-ROK relations. South Korea inaugurated a new president in what was forecasted to usher in a new era of bilateral cooperation and closely aligned interests.\(^ {24}\) Large-scale and sometimes violent protests against U.S. beef imports debilitated the Lee administration in the summer of 2008 and damaged its mandate to move swiftly on substantive upgrades to the alliance. The hard-fought KORUS trade agreement faltered. The United States implemented the long-sought visa waiver program for Korean nationals and added South Korea to NATO+3 to ease the process for military sales. Multiple presidential summits were held. The allies harmonized their approaches to North Korea after a

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\(^{23}\)To remind, this subset of articles excludes those tagged as having a “DPRK,” “ROK-DPRK,” or “U.S.-DPRK” focus. Nonetheless, the diminished portion of security-related articles within the “ROK” and “U.S.-ROK” subset is notable.

period in which close coordination appeared to suffer. Nuts-and-bolts alliance issues featured in these years included questions about the OPCON transfer timeline, continued negotiations over cost sharing for base realignment, and South Korea’s decision to participate in the Proliferation Security Initiative. Favorable views of the United States among South Koreans rose to 70 percent in 2008 and 78 percent in 2009, significant gains from the 2003 rate of 46 percent. Several of these developments warrant a closer look at associated American media coverage.

**Presidential summits**

Summitry was largely unsuccessful at generating positive, substantive U.S. coverage of the Lee and Obama administrations’ goals for the alliance. The June 2009 Lee-Obama summit produced only one dedicated article. That *Washington Post* story focused on Lee seeking assurances of the U.S. nuclear umbrella and briefly touched on trade, but was silent on the central issue of the talks—the adoption of a joint vision for the alliance’s future. The previous summit between Lee and Bush in April 2008 fared slightly better, accompanied mostly by coverage of lifting of the beef import ban, and also one very thorough *New York Times* article on Lee’s goals for the summit that reviewed issues from KORUS to the U.S. troop presence and coordinated approaches to North Korea. This article by Onishi Norimitsu, perhaps more than any other in the sample, managed to introduce readers to multiple high-priority issues in the relationship. Coverage of Bush’s August 2008 trip to Seoul was moderately substantive, touching on coordination of approaches to North Korea and ROK contributions to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but devoted a heavy portion of space to the protest rallies that greeted Bush and the shadow that the summer beef demonstrations had cast.

Obama’s November 2009 Asia trip, by contrast, turned out some very positive-tone coverage of Korea, as his stop in Seoul was seen as proceeding much more smoothly than his visits to Tokyo, where differences over a U.S. base relocation put relations with the new Democratic Party of Japan government of to a rocky start, and Beijing, where analysts said he was not treated as well as past visiting presidents. Reporters noted evidence of close cooperation between Presidents Obama and Lee and the absence of large-scale protests, which had come to be a usual occurrence on such occasions, and generally painted Korea as a reliable longtime ally. But, characteristically, headlines were focused not on the broader picture of relations but on Obama’s remarks in the joint press conference with Lee on Iran, North Korea, and the trade agreement’s troubles. Meetings between the two heads of state might be expected to be occasions on which news reports would acquaint readers with a more complete range of the bilateral issues at hand, but for the most part this was not the case for the U.S.-ROK presidential summits of 2008 and 2009.

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South Korean protests against imports of U.S. beef

The beef protests were much more successful than summitry at generating coverage. June 2008 saw 40 ROK and U.S.-ROK articles, more than double the two-year average of 13 per month. The *Wall Street Journal* described public outrage as bringing the Lee government to its knees. The articles tended to focus first on the scale of the protests, instances of violence and police response, and political challenges that the demonstrations posed to the Lee administration. Most did not characterize the protests as “anti-American” or draw dire conclusions of damage to overall bilateral relations. Key to this was the absence of strongly charged statements from Bush administration officials that hinted at such conclusions, which could well have heightened protestors’ perceptions of U.S. intransigence on the issue and invited more grim assessments of prospective damage to the alliance. As it was, Ambassador Alexander Vershbow had to apologize for suggesting that South Koreans “learn more about the science” on the issue.

A point of comparison is the coverage of the 2002-2003 demonstrations and candlelight vigils in Seoul, triggered by anger over the deaths of two schoolgirls in an accident with a U.S. military vehicle. There have been charges—and acknowledgements by American reporters—that the reporting on these events did not present a sufficiently informative picture of the nuances and sources of public anger toward the United States. In contrast, coverage of the beef protests appeared to rectify those shortcomings. A report by Evan Ramstad of the *Wall Street Journal* found room to touch on the role of activist groups in bringing democracy to the country in the late 1980s, to paint a picture of the range of issues that were galvanizing left-wing groups, and to describe domestic political implications in detail. A *New York Times* analysis described historical roots of Korean nationalism. The *New York Times* published a letter from former American ambassador to South Korea Donald Gregg calling for both administrations to handle the issue with sensitivity and appealing to readers and policymakers to consider the broader context of the South Korea as a “tremendous ally” and its contribution to various U.S. wars.

Op-ed pieces on the subject were rather emotionally charged. The *Washington Post* published two editorials that excoriated South Koreans for their “wildly exaggerated fears of mad cow disease,” “irrational resistance to beef imports,” and “exquisite sensitivity to remote health risks.” Despite the media relaying some of the more outrageous rumors being spread by South Korean civic groups, though, non-analysis news stories took a non-dismissive tone on South Koreans’ concerns about mad cow disease, and most did not wade into the murky territory surrounding the evidence for the various claims. U.S. reporters’ dispassionate retelling of the events and accurate identification of the South Korean government—rather than the United States—as the primary target of outrage can be partly credited with the fact that Americans’ perceptions of South Koreans through this period do not appear to have suffered substantially.

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Traditional and Nontraditional Alliance Issues

Despite the significance of Korea’s addition to NATO+3, implementation of the visa waiver program, and discussions of the OPCON transfer timeline to the health of the bilateral relationship, none of these issues were covered by the three newspapers in 2008-2009. The methodology used here does not produce a very accurate snapshot of coverage of a core alliance issue—U.S.-South Korean cooperation on North Korea. But in an era in which policymakers are attempting to expand the rationale for the alliance beyond its traditional mission of defense against North Korea, it’s worth noting that the discussion of these potential new elements of cooperation—in energy, climate change, and other areas—37—is not taking place in the media, despite Seoul’s vision and nascent steps toward a “global Korea.” The Wall Street Journal did report the Korean government’s unilateral commitment to emissions reduction targets in November 2009, painting a positive picture of the Lee government’s environmental agenda, 38 but the Lee administration’s “low carbon, green growth” initiatives were not otherwise covered. 2009 also saw the movement for a broader South Korean commercial nuclear program gather steam, but the beginnings of what will be an important debate over the 2014 renegotiation of the U.S.-ROK bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement were not reflected in the media.

Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement

The KORUS trade agreement was signed in June 2007, but 2008-2009 saw prospects for the deal suffer successively first with the beef protests, then with the onset of global economic crisis, and finally with Democrats’ win of the White House. How was the fate of KORUS portrayed in the U.S. media, and what did it mean for the framing of public perceptions? Editorial and opinion pieces in the three newspapers were invariably pro-KORUS and called strongly for immediate ratification by both sides. In most cases, articles warned Americans that European companies were likely to get a leg up in the Korean market if the EU-Korea pact was ratified first. The Wall Street Journal and New York Times covered Obama’s November 2009 vow to revive KORUS, but focused on its unlikely fate in the face of daunting congressional opposition.

It is perhaps on this Korea-related issue that the greatest disconnect exists between the broader American public on one hand and the strategic community on the other, but one would not know it from reading mass media reporting of the trade deal. Over half of Americans blame trade agreements for job losses, while only 13 percent believe they create jobs. 39 A plurality of Koreans, too, think their country would lose more from KORUS than it would gain, with only 37 percent saying the reverse—even as 70 percent thought that passage of the agreement would promote friendly bilateral relations. 40 Meanwhile, foreign policy elites in both countries have uniformly seized on KORUS not only as an economically beneficial deal but also as one that is essential to the wellbeing of the alliance and whose rejection would damage long-term bilateral

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37 Scott Snyder, “Pursuing a Comprehensive Vision for the U.S.-South Korea Alliance,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2009.
40 Gallup Poll conducted April-May 2007.
relations. This theme is propagated with certainty despite the presence of credible economists on both sides of the debate, and in spite of the fact that the particulars of trade economics are outside the realm of expertise of most in the strategic community. High-level statements that failure to ratify would doom broader relations, while intended to generate movement on the deal, resonated through the media and sent the message to the substantial portions of both publics that opposed the deal that they were harming relations. Such a message, even if true to the extent that the Roh and Lee administrations had invested valuable political capital in the deal, could arguably diminish American audiences’ perceptions of the current and future health of U.S.-Korea relations.

Several important elements of the trade deal story were largely ignored by the media. First, the major newspapers did not fulfill their responsibility to question the claims of government officials attempting to sell an economic policy to the American public. Take, for example, claims about the number of American jobs that the deal would create. Over the period of study, 2008-2009, almost all Wall Street Journal articles touching on KORUS stated that the deal was expected to boost two-way trade by various amounts within five years—either by $10-$20 billion or by $20-$30 billion—citing unnamed analysts when, in fact, the likely source of these numbers was the U.S. International Trade Commission, a federal agency. The New York Times similarly forecasted a $20 billion annual trade boost, citing unidentified experts. The statistic that Americans most care about—impact on jobs—was not provided. Instead, multiple Washington Post editorials claimed, without evidence, that the deal would create jobs; this echoed identical claims by government officials, but which have been found to only reflect the number of jobs that might be created by higher demand for U.S. exports, rather than reflecting net job creation after accounting for increased imports from Korea. Journalists also neglected to investigate contents of the agreement that many Americans would find objectionable: A weakening of the South Korean government’s bargaining power vis-à-vis pharmaceutical companies to secure affordable medicine for its citizens; accelerated financial deregulation—like prohibiting the banning of complex financial products or the limiting of banks’ size—that is at odds with lessons learned from the recent economic meltdown; the undermining of Korean emissions regulations designed to ease its cities’ air pollution and reduce reliance on fossil fuels; and the granting of investor rights that expose both sovereign governments to lawsuits.

41 For instance, former ambassadors and other authors of the ‘New Beginnings’ report wrote that “failure to ratify the KORUS FTA would constitute a major setback for the U.S.-South Korea partnership” and “would inevitably damage U.S.-ROK relations over the long term.” ‘New Beginnings’ in the U.S.-ROK Alliance: Recommendations to Policymakers,” Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University and The Korea Society, April 2008. Separately, President Lee said in August 2008 that ratifying the FTA was necessary to “make the alliance firm.”

42 Renowned Princeton economist and Nobel Prize winner Paul Krugman, for instance, is a prominent critic of KORUS.


conducted in foreign tribunals, over environmental, labor, and other public interest safeguards. Failure to report on the glaring contradictions between some of KORUS’s contents and two recognized bilateral imperatives—climate change and global financial stabilization—leaves the public weakened in its ability and will to influence the policymaking process on this important issue. Yet another theme that was missed throughout KORUS reporting was that of shared opposition between both publics. Resistance among large and diverse swaths of both publics to the trade deal might be viewed as a pool of solidarity between Korean and American citizens, but the way that KORUS was presented in the U.S. media would have readers believe that anti-KORUS sentiment is of a beggar-thy-neighbor character. Additionally, the media could have explored the claim that KORUS is somehow key to relations. The omission of these newsworthy themes constitutes a missed opportunity to inform Americans that the unpopularity of KORUS on both sides of the Pacific is not an “us against them” issue.

North Korea

North Korea coverage is a key piece of the puzzle at hand, because most of the information about the U.S.-ROK alliance that emerges from mainstream media emerges in the context of event-driven stories about North Korea. But the scarcity of information about the North means that the reliability and quality of most reporting on it is inherently compromised, despite the laudable efforts of some outstanding journalists who have taken up the task. Reliance on hearsay and tidbits from defector networks and unnamed sources, which in the absence of a fuller set of available sources can echo through all news outlets and become magnified relative to their intrinsic worth, is often an unavoidable reality of covering the country. The near-absolute secrecy of the regime has made it difficult to discern Pyongyang’s motives, which in the past has led reporters to resort to describing the leadership as irrational and crazed, though they have more recently avoided those discredited adjectives. As a result, criticism of North Korea coverage is not hard to come by. A report at the U.S.-Korea Institute’s 38 North website, for instance, spared no major newspaper in detailing a lack of sophistication in the reporting on the North’s November 2009 currency redenomination. The authors of that report charged that U.S. newspaper journalists over-relied on sources with an interest in or track record of exaggerating North Korean instability and unrest, like the ROK National Intelligence Service or certain aid or defector organizations, thereby filling an information vacuum with speculation that likely overstated the degree of “chaos” unleashed by the reform. The economic analysis and identification of leadership motives also came up short in most reports.

The volume of reporting on North Korea substantially exceeds reporting on South Korea-related topics; this was especially true in 2008-2009. And the level of detail contained in reporting about topics like nuclear negotiations—a favorite of the media and its audiences—substantially exceeded the level of detail provided in stories about U.S.-ROK topics like presidential summits. But as a whole, reporting on the North Korean threat fell short of providing readers with clues to historical and contemporary context. News stories about North Korea’s nuclear program or its missile tests were tagged as “security” stories for this study, but they typically contain no exposition of North Korea’s security interests and how they might play a role in its

external policy. Reports on North Korean missile or nuclear events were accompanied by description of how they violate Six Party Talks and Non-Proliferation Treaty agreements, but no description of North Korea’s deterrence objectives save for references to Pyongyang’s complaints about Washington’s “hostile policy.” In explaining the “why” of North Korean actions like the May 2009 nuclear test, stories usually did not offer anything beyond quotations from North Korea’s Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) or the views of American officials. As anyone who follows North Korean official pronouncements knows, the former are less than enlightening as to the strategic thinking behind Pyongyang’s provocations. A more informative picture could result from the inclusion of input from varied analysts based in South Korea, the United States, or China, or a historically grounded elucidation of the North Korean regime’s systemic insecurity.

The tendency to transmit official lenses into news stories on North Korea is paralleled by a lack of diverse views on op-ed pages, where outlier opinions are rare, owing in part to a limited range of practical policy options. The absence of meaningful elite disagreement appears to facilitate and reinforce a climate in which the media is not incentivized to take on a more proactive and independent role. However, this is not to say that the content of op-ed pages is irrelevant. Administration officials have demonstrated considerable sensitivity to even mild criticism of its handling of relations in Asia, and one such case was when they were accused in the New York Times and Washington Post of inaction early in the saga of the detention of journalists Laura Ling and Euna Lee in North Korea. The strength of the persuasive link between elite opinions in the media and government action is perhaps unique to the Obama administration, which places special value on its image as a government that is reversing the trend of deteriorating global perceptions of the United States. This is in clear contrast to the last Bush administration, which did not count presidential popularity and broad public support as strategic assets. Official responsiveness to public opinion as shaped by and channeled through editorial and opinion pieces, then, can vary substantially by administration.

A common phenomenon in foreign policy reporting generally is the transmitting of an “elite pluralistic perspective” in which sources are of limited diversity and the debate features inflated presentation of small differences. This phenomenon was visible during the painstaking process of extracting a declaration of North Korea’s nuclear activities in the first half of 2008. There was plentiful detailed reporting on intra-administration quibbles over what would constitute an acceptable declaration. Yet these articles identified the parameters of policy options as those favored by certain Bush administration officials on the one hand, and more conservative Bush administration officials (in Vice President Cheney’s office) and their allies on the other. Opinion pieces largely followed this debate contour, too, with the Wall Street Journal giving space to

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Secretary Rice\(^{55}\) and then a few days later to John Bolton as counterpoint,\(^{56}\) despite the fact that these authors have no lack for platforms to make their voices heard. The *New York Times*\(^{57}\) and *Washington Post*\(^{58}\) editorial boards seemed to walk a line right down the middle of this carefully defined debate by offering reluctant support for the acceptance of a watered-down North Korean declaration. Although this coverage informed readers in detail about an inner policy battle over North Korea policy, it could have benefited from a more diverse set of sources and views.

In short, there is a general lack of enthusiasm—among news consumers, news producers, leaders, or all three—for exploring the circumstances of Pyongyang’s insecurity and for delving deeper into the range of its behavioral objectives, which while difficult to discern are surely necessary to a complete story. North Korea’s identity in the American mind as the enemy seems to have survived a seamless transition from a subject of Cold War containment to a dangerous rogue state in need of policing, helped by a media that has not raised critical questions about the evolution of the use of American military and diplomatic power. On the topic of North Korea, then, news consumers have an information disadvantage not necessarily in terms of quantity, but in terms of comprehensiveness and diversity: The narrow parameters of debate in the media mean constrain the potential for substantive public debate, inherently limiting popular influence on policymaking.

**Broadcast Television**

Data for television coverage of the Korean peninsula was obtained from the Tyndall Report, which monitors and categorizes reporting by the weekday evening newscasts of three major U.S. broadcast networks: *ABC World News*, *CBS Evening News*, and *NBC Nightly News*.\(^{59}\) Together, these networks have an audience over 20 million people.\(^{60}\) For the decade beginning in 2000, roughly one third of minutes on these programs were devoted to foreign policy topics or international topics. Again, the query terms were “Korea,” “Seoul,” and “Pyongyang.” The Tyndall Report’s search results produce stories that focused on Korea, but do not return stories that only mention Korea in passing. The resulting data set is a small one: Network evening news programs broadcast 51 stories about Korea from 2008-2009.

| Table 5: Number of TV Broadcast Network Evening News Stories about Korea, 2008-2009. |
|---|---|
|       | 2008 | 2009 |
| ABC    | 5     | 11    |
| CBS    | 4     | 13    |
| NBC    | 4     | 14    |
| **Total** | **13** | **38** |

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In stark contrast with the composition of newspaper coverage, economics and trade stories took a backseat to security- and diplomacy-focused stories. Absent an outlet with the business-and-trade bent of the Wall Street Journal, there was only one story about Korea that focused on economics.\footnote{NBC Nightly News, November 20, 2009 (Tyndall-assigned story title “Manufacturing industrial sector halts decline: Rural mill town revived by Korean auto plant”).} Critiques of television news programming as sensationalistic hold up well in a case study of reporting on Korea. Nearly half of these stories were about North Korea’s nuclear program, which after all is a sensational topic, and another quarter were about Laura Ling and Euna Lee. The stories about Ling and Lee were heavily from a human interest angle, with limited words offered on the political subtext of their ordeal and rescue. Only one story could be said to be about South Korea itself, and that was a story about video games.\footnote{CBS Evening News, March 26, 2008 (Tyndall-assigned story title: “Videogames titles, design, development trends: South Korean TV turns e-athletes into stars”).} Just six stories could be said to belong to the U.S.-ROK geographic designation, and these were still heavily human interest stories—the death of a decorated Korean war veteran, for example, and the tale of an American Olympian’s search for his Korean birth parents. Jumping forward from this two-year period, CNN coverage of the November 2010 North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong Island was alarmist, announcing that the peninsula was “on the brink of war” and that the incident constituted “shattering an armistice of more than 50 years.”\footnote{“Destruction on island at center of Korean barrage,” CNN, November 26, 2010.}

On rare occasions when these outlets carried informative stories on the security problems faced by South Korea, though, television news provided a welcome visual augmentation to the information one might otherwise read in a newspaper—video footage taken by a reporter riding on a coastguard cutter near the Northern Limit Line or of the tank-stoppers along highways leading to Seoul, or an opportunity to better witness the tenor and tone of U.S. officials commenting on North Korea policy. One CBS story at the end of 2009 could be said to provide American viewers with an uncharacteristically informative reminder of the fundamental security challenge faced on the peninsula: A report on how a new Korean conflict might unfold militarily, with comparisons of force sizes and quality, animated illustrations of potential North Korean attack tactics, and interviews with former USFK Commander John Tilelli and Joseph Bermudez of Jane’s Intelligence Review. A brief story on North Korea’s June 2008 declaration of its nuclear assets gave a capable summary, using clear bullet points, of the content and shortcomings contained in each.

But in general, evening television news coverage of Korea on these networks was extremely distilled and superficial in nature, and beyond presenting basic facts appeared to act almost purely as that “conveyer belt” for official messages and information framing. Security-related stories nearly exclusively used current and former American officials for sources. Stories concerning diplomacy toward North and South Korea typically centered on recent overseas trips by U.S. statesmen and aired their statements without seeking comment from those who might hold alternative views.
New Media

The new media is an extremely unstructured, fluid set of information sources, and there may be no way to systematically analyze its content, audiences, and impact. But it is possible to conceive of two broad categories. The first comprises the new media extensions of well-established newspapers, wire services, and television and radio networks. These entities are clearly maneuvering to remain relevant by repackaging information for new methods of dissemination, for instance podcasts or blogs, and by having a Web presence that makes their content quickly accessible by direct site visits or search engine queries. But in comparison with the findings one can draw about the presentation of Korea issues in national newspapers, this subset of the new media is not dramatically altering the equilibrium of what the average American learns about the peninsula. The primary consequence of this first category of new media is that it has, if possible, even further accelerated the process by which newsworthy developments across the globe are transmitted to anyone who tunes in. The advent of cable news channels and the 24-hour news cycle was said to pressure officials to learn about and craft responses to international developments under much greater time pressure;64 online news has only intensified this phenomenon and, in some cases, constrains the ability of government sources to frame information.

The other, more dynamic subset of the new media includes a bounty of fresh web-based English-language information sources for Americans who want to keep up with the peninsula. Source types that fall into this category include clearinghouses for analysis from a wide range of Korea-watchers, in the form of websites or listservs; compilations of English-language news reports from the region; public diplomacy by official entities like the State Department or U.S. Forces Korea using new technologies; new media outreach by think tanks and other civil society actors; and opinion blogs and maintained by non-journalists, often Americans who have an academic, professional, or other interest in the peninsula or Western expatriates living in Korea. Blogs might relay Korean or other Asian news coverage of events of interest. They might focus on a subtopic like the North Korean economy, the U.S. military presence, or South Korean pop culture. Or, they might present original views and analysis about the security situation on the peninsula.

As a consumer of this information, I have made a preliminary attempt to sketch a few assumptions about new media with regard to news about the Koreas. First, new media content about the Koreas is not dominated by a single ideological lens, a critique leveled earlier at coverage by major U.S. newspapers. New media has decidedly increased the accessibility of non-mainstream analysis and obscure information to people interested in seeking it out. At the same time, however, there are pitfalls associated with the “democratization” of the creation of media content. Citizen journalism has inherent limits, particularly in the realm of foreign affairs, and the blogosphere is known to suffer from declining marginal value-added as authors recycle content and cover the same stories. Additionally, specialized new media sources are unlikely to attract audiences beyond specialists or, at most, surfers with a passing interest in the Korean peninsula. This, in combination with the fact that large portions of the new media are dependent upon the legwork provided by traditional news outfits and their online extensions, means that

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coverage by major U.S. newspapers is likely to continue to strongly shape what Americans learn about the Koreas.

Finally, the American new media again has a very different function than its South Korean counterpart. South Korea has been a trailblazer in the digital revolution and is one of the most wired (or wireless) populaces on the planet. Young South Koreans widely use Internet-based news sources, such as OhMyNews. The Internet has facilitated the networking and coordination of liberal non-governmental organizations and other civil society groups, and even empowered them. The Internet has played a role in enabling citizen activists and NGOs in “forming loose, temporary coalitions with one another to organize large-scale protests on a particular issue,” according to a Congressional Research Service report. Contentious alliance-related issues, in addition to domestic political debates, can become instantly viral. Internet-based media and communication tools are credited with assisting Roh Moo-Hyun’s election campaign, and with helping to generate the 2002 vigils and the 2008 beef protests—all developments that had significant bearing on South Korean alliance politics. Politically-motivated official attempts at Internet censorship, in the form of blocking anonymity and deleting content seen as overly sympathetic to North Korea, reflect the power of the South Korean new media and its potential to impact domestic and foreign policy. By contrast, the U.S. new media have not been seen to rally or divide Americans on any Korea-related issue.

The “Foreign Policy Marketplace” and U.S. Media Coverage of Korea

A tidy picture of the interplay among media, policymakers, popular opinion, foreign actors, and events is elusive in the case of U.S. reporting on the Koreas, as it has proved in most case studies. The direction and strength of the links between the variables is not fixed. The process is a dynamic one in which initiative can originate from any of these points, and in which the media’s specific role can vary with information availability, popular interest, government agendas, and the dictates of capacity and competition among news outlets. The U.S. media was rarely seen to be an initiator of policy action or popular agitation on Korea issues. Non-editorial reporting was usually spurred by events—like presidential summits, North Korean missile tests, and the beef protests—or government agendas, like the pursuit of agreement on KORUS. In both cases, stories usually relied heavily on and transmitted the interpretations of officials. U.S. officials do consult major newspapers for facts about emerging events to complement the information provided by internal newsgathering, but they do not do so out of concern that they might need to address American popular pressure generated by reporting on Korea.

Opinion and editorial content, on the other hand, did serve to shape policy choices in some cases. This process was described earlier with respect to KORUS. Another occasion during the period studied in which the media was a true independent variable was the North Korean detention of

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66 A true “initiator” role, in the author’s view, would be akin to the fall 2009 investigative reporting on Internet privacy by the Wall Street Journal, which addressed an issue of public interest, roused public protest, and triggered Congressional action.
Laura Ling and Euna Lee. Americans were captivated by evening news reports of their plight, and op-ed page appeals arguably spurred the Obama administration to greater action than it was original disposed to. Because of its role as a forum for elite debate, it should be noted, editorial and opinion space in major U.S. newspapers is regularly consulted by leaders in both countries. Yet as noted earlier, the strength of the persuasion potential from op-ed content varies depending on the sensitivity of the administration.

Returning to the “foreign policy marketplace” model of interaction between the media, public opinion, and foreign policy, what conclusions does this paper point to about the equilibrium in this marketplace? The Koreas are clearly a subject about which American popular awareness is critically low: American public attention to foreign policy generally is minimal, as noted previously, and Americans are typically worse-informed on Asia issues than on European ones. A May 2010 poll of revealed that only 23 percent of Americans identified South Korea as a U.S. ally, with another 23 percent identifying the country as a “friend” to the United States and a full 14 percent saying they thought South Korea was an enemy. Another 2010 poll showed that only 51 percent of Americans think of South Korea as democracy. These numbers must be at least partly the result of general ignorance in foreign affairs—some people must be confusing the two Koreas—rather than disapproval of South Korean policies. Americans really don’t know their alliance partner. The usual equilibrium regarding South Korean and U.S.-ROK issues, then, entails a serious information deficit on the part of the public and an acute information advantage on the part of the leadership. Crises or difficult periods in the bilateral relationship, with the exception of the 2002-2003 protests, usually do not rise to a level at which the American public demands a surge of news coverage and attempts to narrow its information disadvantage. The most obvious ways in which this equilibrium could be altered are an outbreak of military conflict on the peninsula, or repeated alliance frictions on the degree of 2002-2003.

The equilibrium for North Korea issues is somewhat different: There is a unique information deficit suffered by all three parties in the marketplace. Americans’ low understanding of the country and its motivations is shared even by the foreign policy elite and decision makers in Washington. At the same time, the perpetual, medium-level nuclear crisis keeps news about the country on newspaper pages and evening television broadcasts, ensuring that a significant portion of Americans maintains a rudimentary knowledge of North Korea as a nuclear troublemaker and humanitarian disaster. For example, the March 2010 Cheonan sinking did register on the average American’s radar: In the same poll in which respondents demonstrated their ignorance of U.S.-South Korean relations, taken about a month after the attack, 67 percent identified North Korea as an enemy of the United States, and 59 percent thought that war between the North and South was likely to break out in the next year. Partly as a result of the paucity of verifiable stories coming out of the country, however, coverage of North Korea often serves the “conveyor belt” function, with the media relying heavily on leaders for access to information and readily transmitting their framing of the issues. Given these information equilibriums, the Koreas are clearly a case where a minimally informed public relies on elite

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67 Baum & Potter, 2008: 42.
positions, expressed in mainstream media, to form its conclusions. But the debate on Korea issues is typically quite narrow: The mainstream media rarely presents lenses on the North Korean security problem that differ meaningfully from the perspectives of policymakers. This equilibrium could be altered, of course, by dramatic deterioration of the security situation in Northeast Asia.

**Conclusion and Outlook for the Media’s Role in U.S.-South Korea Relations**

The clearest conclusion from these data is that within what is arguably the under-reporting of Korea issues, the U.S.-South Korea relationship itself receives only a cursory and shrinking treatment in major U.S. media outlets. Grassroots ignorance of U.S.-ROK issues is a weak point in the relationship, and it is related at least in part to limited U.S. mainstream media coverage of these topics. Under-reporting of the alliance might also be seen as a typical feature of a society whose citizens are uninterested in knowing about their country’s extensive overseas military presence, its history, and its consequences. But unlike some of the other topics covered in this volume, this one does not avail us of any true policy recommendations, because of the nature of the stakeholder—a free media that answers, logically, to competition and profit motives. It is clear that if Americans are to become real, informed stakeholders in U.S. Korea policy, this would need to occur not through the media but through other institutions and channels, perhaps starting with more robust secondary education in history and geopolitics.

Nonetheless, the role of the media in U.S.-South Korea relations is an important one to evaluate and understand. The data serve as a reminder that the interplay of public opinion and foreign policymaking toward Korea is much less dynamic in the United States than the corresponding process in South Korea. It is logical that the American media is so much less prolific and polarized on Korea issues than its counterpart is on U.S.-ROK and DPRK issues: The Korean peninsula and its security problems seem distant to Americans, who do not feel directly threatened by Pyongyang.

This absence in the United States of polarized perspectives on South Korea means that alliance managers have usually had freedom to pursue administration agendas while focusing on navigating public opinion in Korea only. But as demonstrated by the plunge in American perceptions of South Korea in 2002-2003, it can be hazardous to take this luxury for granted. Expected and unexpected frictions in the relationship are best weathered when there is broad popular understanding of what is ultimately at stake. The experience of the 2002-2003 demonstrations showed that the media is important because it shapes public perceptions, which in turn shape reality. Sensitivity to the role of the media and careful, even coordinated public diplomacy are strategies by which defense and foreign affairs officials on both sides can preserve positive views of South Korea among American citizens. The way the beef protests were covered is evidence that American officials have learned, and practiced with relative success during the summer of 2008, valuable lessons about what kinds of public diplomacy fare best in the sometimes-stormy waters of Korean popular opinion. When future frictions do arise—whether over trade differences, U.S. basing, or transitions to a more equal alliance—official statements that exaggerate the risks to broader relations should be recognized as counter-
productive and potentially self-fulfilling as they resonate through the media and frame debates in both countries.

Going forward, positive coverage of Obama’s November 2009 visit to Seoul foreshadows the possibility that the media could relay to the American public a sense of Korea’s stable and even growing role in U.S. interests in Asia. Americans’ perceptions of Korea are likely to be enhanced to the extent that U.S. encounters difficulties in its relations with Japan (over continued differences with the Democratic Party of Japan) and China (over a range of obstacles to building strategic trust and integrating China into the existing international order).

American popular perceptions of South Korea are also likely to be impacted positively by media coverage of Seoul’s growing presence on the world stage. For example, Korea’s hosting of the G-20 summit in November 2010 was watched closely throughout the year for what world leaders would do to prevent future economic crises. Although the meeting was not seen as very fruitful, it provided a visibility boost for South Korea, for instance by warranting a special section of varied articles on the country in the Wall Street Journal. Other opportunities for positive, high-profile coverage could highlight to Americans Korea’s increased hand in global affairs.

Tensions with North Korea always have the potential to alter the information equilibrium among the media, policymakers, and the American public. Repeated incidents on the order of the Cheonan sinking or the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, or other developments that might bring the two Koreas into real conflict, could trigger a surge of public attention to the peninsula. A recent poll by the Chicago Council for Global Affairs indicates that the North Korean threat buffers already-high American public support for U.S. bases in South Korea, suggesting that crises such as these should have a rallying effect for close military ties. However, depending on the specific circumstances, it’s possible that severe escalation of tensions could prompt a popular realization about the potential for U.S. military involvement, a prospect about which American opinions are decidedly more mixed. In these circumstances, there could follow an atypical divergence of elite opinions on op-ed pages about decisions being made in Washington and Seoul, and possibly increased public scrutiny too.

Reporting on other countries in the region could indirectly impact popular sentiment about Washington’s relationship with Seoul. The same Chicago Council poll data suggests that if Americans begin to worry more about China as a potential future military threat, they will correspondingly favor the maintenance of a strong alliance with South Korea. Given this connection made in the minds of many Americans between China’s rise and the U.S. security relationship with South Korea, how the story of rising China plays out in the mass media will affect Americans’ attitudes toward South Korea.

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Among the proposals for new directions the alliance should take, a common theme is that of a more equal relationship, with expanded bilateral cooperation in nontraditional security areas like the environment and energy and the transfer of greater defense burden from the United States to South Korea. Both publics, to the extent that they are informed, are likely to support the idea of a more equal partnership and the adoption of non-military rationales for closer cooperation. But the U.S. media is not up to the task of communicating to Americans the broader societal convergences that form the basis for shared bilateral interests. This constitutes a gap in the foundation for lasting friendship on a popular level, one that policymakers should look to other actors to fill.