US Policy toward the Korean Peninsula and ROK-US Relations

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US policy toward the Korean peninsula is part of a larger framework of global, Northeast Asian and Korean peninsular strategic interests. At the global level, the US deals with North Korea in terms of preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and American policy toward Pyongyang’s nuclear weapon and missile development is basically premised on this global strategic view. At the regional level, the US must maintain the balance of power in Northeast Asia; the regional context of US policy to North Korea is interconnected with its policy toward China. At the Korean peninsular level, the US must reduce the tension between the two Koreas in order to prevent the outbreak of a war on the peninsula and must also seek the ways by which a sudden North Korean collapse can be successfully managed. However, it is still unclear whether the Clinton administration puts more importance on the North-South dialogue as a way of reducing tensions than upon the US-DPRK normalization process.

One important area where the interests coincide between Korea and the US: Korea, for the purpose of survival, and the US, in order to protect its leadership, both need an equilibrium within Northeast Asia. However, convergence of interests does not always guarantee policy coordination. The first priority of the Clinton administration’s North Korea policy lies at the global level, the second at regional, and the third at the peninsular level. Korea’s priorities are reverse that.

In order to make the Korea-US policy coordination more effective, first of all it is necessary for both parties to have more opportunities for coordinating policy priorities between their presidents, foreign ministers and working-level security officials. Second, the South Korean government needs to convince the US government that the US remain South
Korea's ally rather than trying to play the role of a mediator between the two Koreas. Third, Korea and the US should make all efforts to cause their alliance to enter a consolidation stage in which they frequently consult each other on bilateral as well as regional issues and seek agenda building. In order to make that possible, Korea needs to manage well, through good political leadership, its relationship with China as well as the increasing cynicism about the United States among its conservative middle class. Finally, Seoul should seek multilateral supplementary measures such as the NEASED (Northeast Asia Security Dialogue) since the development of the ROK-US relationship cannot alone ensure the national interests of South Korea.
The Korean Peninsula after the 1996 US Elections

The US presidential election campaign of 1996 was waged mostly over domestic issues such as the economy, welfare reform and reducing the federal deficit. Major foreign policy issues such as those involving North Korea, the Middle East and the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) failed to attract voter attention. President Bill Clinton, making the most of his administration's economic achievements, fended off attacks by Republican candidate Bob Dole and won reelection to a second term.

No longer hampered by concerns about reelection, President Clinton is paying more attention to foreign affairs and diplomacy now despite voter indifference to foreign policy. In a post-election press conference on November 8, 1996, he outlined the basic goals of US foreign policy as, first, expanding NATO while cooperating with Russia; second, bringing about peace in disputed areas; third, enhancing concern about global issues such as terrorism and narcotics; and fourth, establishing an open and fair world trade order. Significantly, he did not use this opportunity to mention specifically the Korean peninsula in his outline of American foreign policy concerns. This omission would seem to imply that US foreign policy, in particular the administration's policy of freezing North Korea's nuclear program and easing tension on the Korean peninsula—both regarded as major diplomatic achievements of
Clinton’s first term—can be expected to be carried out in accordance with the global framework of US strategy toward Northeast Asia.

As a matter of course, however, given the American system of checks and balances, the Clinton administration and Congress will inevitably disagree at times over foreign policy issues. This is especially true as the executive and legislative branches of government continue to be controlled by different political parties. There is a broad consensus on US policy toward North Korea among members of the Democratic administration and the Republican-controlled Congress, but the two sides differ on the best way to carry it out. Thus, the administration’s second-term policy toward North and South Korea will hinge on how well it can minimize the Republican challenge to its methods.

Since the 1994 Geneva agreed Framework was made between the US and North Korea in October 1994, it has become a fait accompli that the United States and Japan are moving toward the stage in which they cross-recognize the two Koreas. This new phenomenon indicates a restructuring of the order in Northeast Asia. The four-power relations surrounding the Korean peninsula are becoming multi-dimensional as well as more complex, which could present either a bright or gloomy outlook for the reunification of the two Koreas, depending on how the situation develops.¹

North Korea has been putting its every effort to improving relations with the United States. In particular, Pyongyang’s “cooperative gesture” shown in continuing its freeze of nuclear development programs has been welcomed by the Clinton administration, which on its part has been implementing an engagement policy with North Korea. However, the US government has the dual task of helping to improve inter-Korean relations while at the same time going ahead with normalization of relations with the North. It seems that the US and ROK governments tend to think this dual task can be achieved if Pyongyang accepts the four-party talks proposed jointly by them in April 1996.

Against such a backdrop, this paper will analyze American policy towards the Korean peninsula at global, regional, and peninsular levels in terms of the contrasted perceptions about North Korea policy on the part of the Clinton administration and the Republican-controlled Congress. Then, a “trilateral game” among the United States, South and North Korea will be highlighted in the context of their differing policy preferences. On the basis of these analyses, finally, tasks for South Korea–US cooperation will be explored.

**US Policy toward the Korean Peninsula: Three Levels**

American policy toward the Korean peninsula in general and North Korea in particular is part of a larger framework of global, Northeast Asian and Korean peninsular strategic interests. Since the US-DPRK Agreed Framework was signed in Geneva in October 1994, the Clinton administration apparently has been conducting its North Korea policy at three different levels.

**Global Level**

At the global level, the US deals with Pyongyang in terms of maintaining American leadership in the post–Cold War era. To protect its role as sole superpower, it has to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction among those nations that do not possess them already. Nuclear proliferation is *ipso facto* a threat to a peaceful world order and regional stability. Thus, US policy towards the North Korean nuclear problem and missile development is basically premised on this global strategic view.

Consensus on this point explains why neither congressional Republicans nor members of Clinton’s own party have raised any substantial objection to the Agreed Framework reached by North Korea and the United States in Geneva in October 1994. At that time, Senator Bob Dole objected strongly to the agreement, but as time passed he muted his objections and during the 1996 presidential election he did not raise the Geneva accord as an issue at all. Congressional Republicans now generally support the DPRK-US agreement as a realistic means of containing Pyongyang’s nuclear development program. We can foresee
that the American North Korea policy will continue to focus on deter-
rting that nuclear development.

The same logic applies to Pyongyang's missile development program, which is seen as a threat to US interests: North Korean missile exports threaten the balance of power in the Middle East, while their existence also threatens the balance of power in Northeast Asia.\(^2\) Through missile talks the Clinton administration is trying to persuade Pyongyang to join the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). On the other hand, the Congressional Republicans want Japan and South Korea to cooperate with the US on anti-missile defense, under what is called the Asia Democracy Defense Plan. As reason for pushing this project on South Korea and Japan, including sale of theater missile defense (TMD), Dole pointed out that North Korea has demonstrated its commitment to deploy intercontinental ballistic missiles, and has intermediate-range missiles ready to be deployed immediately. The Republican push for the plan came out right after the Pentagon decided in January 1996 to cut the budget for the anti-missile defense program in order to finance expenditures in other defense areas.\(^3\)

**Regional Level**

At the regional level, the US needs to maintain a balance of power among the countries in Northeast Asia. The region contains one former superpower in decline, one future superpower rising fast, and one

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2 The first missile talks between the US and North Korea were held in April 1996. The meetings resumed on June 13, 1997, but no agreement was reached, thereby postponing another meeting until July or August.

3 Clinton asked for $2.8 billion for all anti-missile programs, a figure the Republican-led Congress increased to $3.7 billion. Included within the umbrella is the development of a national defense that could be in place by 2003 to protect US territory from a limited number of attacking missiles. The administration requested $508 million in fiscal 1997 for this national defense system, but Congress increased the authorization to $858 million—a 69 percent boost that Republicans want to use to accelerate development and testing of system components before 2000, the year in which Clinton says he would assess the threat of missile attack and decide whether to deploy a defense system. Republicans are ready to commit now to putting such a system in place and have criticized the president for his reluctance to make the same pledge. Pat Towell, "Two Initiatives for Anti-Missile Defense," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, August 10, 1996, p. 2258.
potential superpower unsure of its future identity. To protect its leadership role the United States must act in such a way as not to antagonize China and Japan to the point of driving them into an anti-US consortium, yet neither to exploit the "natural rivalry" between China and Japan to the point of endangering regional peace and stability. To make the first mistake American policy-makers would have to be incredibly incompetent. The only thing keeping China and Japan from pushing each other into an arms race is Japan's acceptance of the American security commitment as a substitute for a military force of its own that would be commensurate with its economic power.\(^4\)

The regional context of the US policy towards North Korea is interconnected most of all with its policy toward China. If it deals successfully with China through the US-Japan security alliance and manages to hold North Korea under its influence, then its goal of preventing the emergence of a hegemon in Northeast Asia can be more easily achieved. Thus, policy towards North Korea at the regional level is understood within the framework of US China policy, which in turn is interrelated with the Taiwan question.

There are currently no substantial policy differences between the Clinton administration and Congress with regard to Northeast Asia. From the US point of view, it is unrealistic to expect a stable balance of power in the region among China, Japan and Russia. Both the administration and Congress recognize the need to continue to provide a security umbrella over Japan so that Tokyo will not be tempted to enlarge its military.

US policy assumes that an American presence is needed to keep mutual distrust between China and Japan from setting off an arms race between them. This was reflected in the US-Japan Joint Declaration on Security of April 1996, and Congress seems even more convinced than the administration of the need to maintain a security alliance with Japan.

When it comes to China, however, there are notable differences between the administration and Congress. Republicans believe Clinton's China policy has oscillated between a hard line and appeasement.\(^5\)

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the three options in China policy most often put forward, as opposed to engagement or selective engagement, Republicans would like to follow one of containment, though they shy away from using that term. On the other hand, the administration, recovering from its early inconsistency, has decided to seek accommodation with China, as exemplified by Secretary of State Warren Christopher's visit to Beijing in November 1996.

**Korean Peninsular Level**

The US must reduce the tension between the two Koreas in order to prevent an outbreak of a war on the peninsula and must seek how a sudden collapse of North Korea can be successfully managed. When we refer to North Korea policy at the peninsula level, it indicates the policies toward tension reduction and/or crisis management, based upon an analysis of the future of the Kim Jong-il regime and the North Korean state system. So far, most of the analyses on the future of the regime are no more than speculation. What is clear, however, is that Kim Jong-il's future is not assured. Nowhere can we find any sign that the new ruler of North Korea is prepared to try the Chinese model of economic reform. North Korea's dilemma is that while pragmatic reform threatens the fundamental basis of its existence, change of policy will not produce the required economic improvement unless it is accompanied by change of system. This is the lesson of Gorbachev's failure.

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5 The 1996 Republican platform argues: "We support the aspiration of the Chinese people for both economic and political liberty, which includes respect for the human rights of the people of the Tibet. Our relationship with the Chinese government will be based on vigilance with regard to its military potential, proliferation activities, and its attitude toward human rights, especially in Hong Kong. . . . We reaffirm our commitment to Taiwan's security and will regard any threat to alter its status by force as a threat to our own security interests. We will make available to Taiwan the material it needs for self-defense, particularly theater missile defense and coastal patrol submarines. . . ." See "The Republican Platform: Prosperity, Self-Government and Moral Clarity," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, August 17, 1996, p. 2334.

Thus, the soft-landing policy of the Clinton administration aims at a gradual, nonviolent change designed to bridge the political and economic differences between the two Koreas. Still unclear, however, is whether the administration puts more importance on North-South dialogue as a way of reducing the tension than it does on the US-DPRK normalization process, which has entered a new phase since North Korea’s so-called apology for the submarine infiltration incident of September 1996.

Though Republicans have not openly discussed it, many members of Congress believe that to ensure stability on the Korean peninsula and guard against an adventurous China, the United States should pursue a triangular alliance with South Korea and Japan by combining the Japan-US and ROK-US alliances. The administration recognizes the importance of its security alliances with South Korea and with Japan, but it has not indicated whether these bilateral relationships should be jointly targeted against Beijing. Any expression of this would of course offend China. Within the framework of Northeast Asia, then, the North Korean question remains interconnected with the US China policy, and in particular the Taiwan question.

The Clinton administration and Congress take the same stand on the importance of preventing war on the Korean peninsula, ensuring stability in Northeast Asia, and maintaining a balance of power in the region. If war does break out on the peninsula, it will shatter the stability of Northeast Asia and the United States will have to intervene, just as it did in 1950.

The US assumes that an economically hard-pressed North Korea will either collapse or lash out against the South. Thus, Washington has sought to help the Pyongyang regime make a soft landing. This policy, however, has led to differences between the administration and Congress whether the United States should follow a policy of deterrence or


of engagement towards the DPRK. The administration regards engagement and deterrence to be opposite sides of the same coin, in that deterrence against North Korean aggression can be effective only when there is engagement with Pyongyang.⁹ On the other hand, the Republican-controlled Congress, while recognizing the need for engagement, believes that the US should pursue a policy of deterrence separately.

Thus, the administration will probably concentrate on muting criticism from a Congress that, though in agreement over basic US policy, favors quite a different methodology. At the same time, it will work to keep North Korea from collapsing through agreeing to exchange liaison offices, easing economic sanctions and seeking diplomatic normalization while holding North Korea to its Geneva commitments. It is thus likely to continue its policy of engagement hoping to nudge Pyongyang towards becoming a responsible member of the international community.

Structure of Trilateral Relations: Two Koreas and the US

US-DPRK Relations

In contrast with geopolitical interests of the United States, the primary task facing North Korea is to maintain its state system. Now since the economic situation has been aggravated by the serious floods of 1995 and 1996, the Kim Jong-il regime is far more concerned about system maintenance.

Concrete policies must be implemented in order to maintain the socialist system; the authorities seek, most of all, improvement in relations with the US in order to resolve current economic difficulties and solidify the Kim Jong-il regime. North Korea has thus been observing the Geneva agreement, freezing its nuclear development program. Since the agreement was made in 1994, Pyongyang has

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⁹ James Laney, former US ambassador to Korea, emphasized that engagement is the “incentive to cooperation,” while deterrence is the “disincentive to confrontation.” This implies that criticizing the US government for its oscillation between engagement and deterrence in its North Korea policy is misguided. See James Laney, “Washington and Seoul: An Alliance That Works,” Speech at the US National Press Club, October 31, 1996.
continued to show a businesslike attitude toward the US, but has refused to enter dialogue with Seoul, even though it promised in the Agreed Framework to do so. In addition, the US, South Korea, and Japan established an international consortium, called the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), and a contract between the DPRK and KEDO has been signed to supply light-water reactors and to define the scope and conditions of the project. Work is currently under way.

In fact, North Korea cooked up the nuclear problem out of a strategic choice to link a relationship with the US to its own system maintenance. As the Cold War ended the global Cold War alliance broke down, and Pyongyang lost its Chinese and Soviet political and economic support. It reached the point at which worsening economic situations were threatening the political system, and resorted to the nuclear option to defend itself. In this sense, the nuclear problem was very much a post–Cold War phenomenon.

**Table 1. US–North Korea Policy Structure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>US policy on North Korea</th>
<th>North Korean policy on the US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Maintaining the NPT and Northeast Asian order</td>
<td>System survival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means</td>
<td>Engagement of North Korea</td>
<td>Normalizing relations with US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food assistance</td>
<td>Play the food card; military (nuclear) threat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing liaison offices</td>
<td>Observe (break) Geneva Agreement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifting economic sanctions</td>
<td>Inter-Korean (4-party) talks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political/Military dialogue</td>
<td>Return remains of US servicemen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In dealing with the nuclear issue, the US recognized the need to prevent nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia because it would threaten the regional order. That required an expanded US influence over Pyongyang, which is the reason for the US engagement policy\(^\text{10}\) that

\(^{10}\) US Department of Defense, United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region (February, 1995).
hopes to bring North Korea into the international community and coax it to launch economic opening and reform.

As shown in Table 1, the United States has various means for achieving the goals and objectives of its Pyongyang policy. With North Korea's suffering from a serious food shortage, providing food aid is regarded as especially meaningful. The US is also considering when it would be best to exchange liaison offices, although it is not clear that North Korea is ready to do so. American policy means include easing economic sanctions as well as sitting at the political and military dialogue table, over which Washington is to discuss with Pyongyang the replacement of the armistice agreement on the peninsula and talks about Pyongyang's missile program.\(^{11}\) From the US point of view, replacing the armistice with a peace regime can be discussed in the proposed four-party talks.

On the other hand, North Korea is making every effort to normalize (or at least to improve) relations with the US, who has what Pyongyang wants, meanwhile driving a wedge between Washington and Seoul; the primary means available is to observe the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework agreement. It is hard to deny that the purpose of this agreement was essentially to bribe North Korea to stop making nuclear weapons, and Pyongyang may believe it will be rewarded every time it threatens to produce them, or that it will be handed another deal if it refuses to allow special inspections when the time comes.

Since the Geneva agreement the North has been pragmatic with the US but has refused to talk with Seoul. Worse, its attitude towards a rice donation from the South in 1994 and the submarine infiltration incident in September 1996 confirmed some of the worst suspicions South Koreans had about North Korean intentions. If the US supports Seoul's position, it has to ask the North to accept inter-Korean dialogue as a precondition for US-DPRK normalization process. If it follows Pyongyang's position, then any improvement in inter-Korean relations

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\(^{11}\) Three days of talks on Pyongyang's missile program between the US and North Korean officials, June 13–15, 1997, ended without any agreement. The missile talks were a follow-up to a first session in Berlin in April 1996 at which US officials asked North Korea to stop producing, testing, and selling missiles, notably to Syria and Iran.
will have to be preceded by US–North Korean normalization. Thus, the uncertainty over whether North Korea accepts any inter-Korean dialogue (or the four-party talks) understood to be an important means for Pyongyang to resolve its problems.

**The Three Parties’ Preferences regarding US-DPRK Relations**

Three variables can be considered, the positions of South Korea, the US and North Korea. In the short term the positions will converge or diverge to produce various situations, although Washington and Pyongyang will in the long run move towards improved relations. The process of US-DPRK normalization, however, cannot be independent from South Korean demands.

**Table 2. Preferences regarding US-DPRK Relations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priorities for the process of US-DPRK normalization</th>
<th>South Korea</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>North Korea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. inter-Korea dialogue (four-party talks)</td>
<td>1. liaison offices</td>
<td>1. easing of economic sanctions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. liaison offices</td>
<td>2. easing of economic sanctions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. easing of economic sanctions</td>
<td>3. return of servicemen’s remains</td>
<td>2. pol/mil dialogue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. return of servicemen’s remains</td>
<td>4. inter-Korean dialogue?</td>
<td>3. liaison offices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. pol/mil dialogue</td>
<td>4. return of servicemen’s remains</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope of US-DPRK normalization</td>
<td>political, economic possible; military impossible</td>
<td>political, economic first; military possible</td>
<td>economic, military first; political possible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 2, the ROK puts top priority on improvement in inter-Korean relations. This requirement has eased somewhat because the proposed four-party talks do aim for inter-Korean dialogue, to be blessed by two guarantors, the US and China.

If inter-Korean relations improve sufficiently, then South Korea will object neither to mutual liaison offices in Washington and Pyongyang nor to easing of economic sanctions. However, Seoul will not under any circumstances tolerate a US–North Korean bilateral deal to replace the Korean War armistice agreement with a peace treaty.
Washington, on the other hand, seems to be taking a go-between position. Although the US is an ally of Seoul, it also has to take the Northern position into consideration due to the before-mentioned strategic interests of its North Korea policy at three levels. In particular, the US government is paying a great deal of attention to the food situation. Pyongyang is demanding massive food aid and the lifting of economic sanctions as a precondition for accepting the proposed four-party talks. However, Washington and South Korea are insisting that they will discuss such matters as government food assistance and easing of economic sanctions when the four-party meeting is held, although the US does want Seoul to provide more food assistance even if on a strictly humanitarian basis.

If possible, the United States would prefer to open a liaison office in Pyongyang, which could serve as a bridgehead to exert influence there. Gradually the US will also lessen its economic sanctions if North Korea continues to behave pragmatically towards Washington, but it is not certain whether Washington really wants inter-Korean dialogue to resume at this moment since that will be possible within the framework of the four-party talks when held. The problem, however, is the uncertainty whether Pyongyang will agree to the talks. Concerning political and military dialogue the US is willing, so long as it can deal with North Korea's missile program.

Lastly, Pyongyang is facing an economic and food crisis that can only be a threat to its system. Thus, it is important how it will utilize the food, foreign currency and energy crisis for normalizing relations with the United States. In light of serious economic situations, North Korea prefers to continue to receive massive food assistance from the international community, and it wants the US to lift economic sanctions. If possible, it will try to resolve the peace treaty issue exclusively with the US in the absence of South Korea. Concerning the liaison office issue, it will be in no hurry since its UN mission in New York serves as a de facto liaison office. In addition, it may be somewhat concerned about an American liaison office in Pyongyang that will be working to see inside the hidden parts of the country.
Future Direction of US–North Korea Relations

Ultimately, US-DPRK relations will depend on American leadership as well as South Korean policy towards North Korea. Until now, the trilateral relationship among the US and the two Koreas has gone through a learning process in which domestic factors and external interests of the three countries have intersected. From now each will conduct its policies vis-a-vis the others with the greater confidence it has accumulated in the learning process. Thus, the future direction of US–North Korean relations will be laid out in one of three ways: meeting the interests of Washington and Pyongyang, those of the US and Seoul, or those of all three. It will depend on the outcome of the on-going learning process.

It thus goes without saying that the South Korean government has to manage well the ROK-US cooperative system in order to achieve favorable outcomes in the trilateral game. Cooperation between South Korea and the US should not aim at isolating North Korea but at attaining a convergence of ROK and American strategic interests.

Tasks for ROK-US Cooperation

As mentioned, the Clinton administration puts first priority in its North Korea policy at the global level, next at the regional and last at the Korean level. Seoul’s priorities are the reverse, that is, the ROK government is more concerned with how to harmonize the progress of improving relations between Washington and Pyongyang with those between Seoul and Pyongyang. The problem has been that North Korea has yet to start restoring trust with Seoul, though it has been vigorous in carrying out negotiations with Washington. If the US-DPRK nego-

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12 The Basic Agreement between the two Koreas signed in December 1991, with its subsidiary protocols, is an ambitious document committing South and North Korea to build confidence and improve relations in political, security, trade and other areas. In particular the agreement, as a road map towards peaceful coexistence, contains specific measures of confidence and security building and arms control with the goal of ending the costly arms race and confrontation between the two parts of Korea. Sung-Han Kim, "Toward the Elaboration of Confidence-Building Measures in Northeast Asia: A Korean Perspective," Presented at the Third Kanazawa Symposium, June 3–5, 1997, Kanazawa, Japan, pp. 13–14.
tations proceed abreast with the improvement of relations between Seoul and Pyongyang, ROK-US relations will remain smooth—otherwise they will face various complications. In this respect, the importance of ROK-US cooperation is emphasized, and we explore the tasks for mutual cooperation.

**Expanding Opportunities for Coordination**

On such issues as food aid, parallel progress in the pace of North-South relations, how to apply or relieve political and economic pressure on North Korea, or how to respond to sudden economic and political instability in the North, tactical coordination is exceedingly difficult but critical. To make the ROK-US policy coordination more effective, first of all, both parties need more opportunities for policy consultation between their presidents, foreign ministers and working-level security officials. This indicates the institutionalization of mutual consultations.

When policymakers of both countries meet, then, what do they have to discuss? First, they need to coordinate the priorities in their respective North Korea policies. The Clinton administration’s North Korea policy priority lies in the order of global, regional, and peninsular levels while Seoul’s priorities are the reverse of that—but even though this is a coordination between the US as a global power and South Korea who is a middle power, it should not be forgotten that the two are blood allies.

Second, they should consult each other on specific strategies vis-a-vis North Korea. This requires preconditions for both countries. The ROK needs to set a clear-cut policy goal. For now, one of the biggest reasons for South Korea’s security dilemma seems to be the absence of definite goals for North Korea policy; the government is too sensitive to public opinion to be clear whether North Korea should survive or collapse. Unless a goal is set, the government will continue to drift between containment and engagement policies. This aggravates the security dilemma.13 On the part of the United States, it should clearly define its

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13 South Korea’s “domestic” approach in dealing with the inter-Korean relations has resulted in policy inconsistencies, growing cleavages with its allies, particularly with the US, and polarized domestic security norms. This seems to be an enduring
soft-landing policy for North Korea, which is understood by many conservative South Koreans as a status-quo policy, or a division-oriented approach to the peninsula. Thus, Washington needs to show that the final destination of the soft-landing policy is not necessarily survival of the Kim Jong-il regime—it could also include the possibility of collapse. In other words, the soft-landing policy should include a "softer hard landing" for North Korea, thereby demanding that both governments prepare concrete ways of dealing with a sudden change in North Korea.

Finally, top policy-makers of both countries should discuss frankly how crises might occur on the peninsula and how to deal effectively with them. This does not necessarily presuppose the collapse of North Korea. In addition, they need to embark on candid discussion about their long-term policy directions or options such as an American military presence in unified Korea, role setting of the US armed forces in

security dilemma of South Korea, which hampers it in fully achieving diplomatic goals. Although South Korea has achieved democratization and a remarkable economic growth, South Korea's security dilemma continues, and it must be overcome on a gradual basis. Concerning this dilemma, see In-Taek Hyun, “Janus-Faced Post-Cold War and South Korea's Enduring Security Dilemma,” Paper Presented at the ISA-JAIR Joint Convention, September 20–22, 1996, Japan.

Concerning US and South Korean management of possible crises on the peninsula, see Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula: Korea-US Responses (Seoul: Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, 1997). This is a proceedings issue of the annual conference between IFANS and the Brookings Institution, held November 19–20, 1996.

Even before Korean reunification, the first issue North Korea may come up with, if and after its relations with Washington are normalized, will regard the existing ROK-US alliance. North Korea's demand has long been that the United States must remove its troops from Korea. Its current heightened voice calling for replacement of the armistice agreement with a bilateral peace pact between North Korea and the United States has been aimed at realizing its longstanding demand for the withdrawal of US forces from the South. The possibility for Washington to accept Pyongyang's demand can be ruled out for the time being, but once the two enter into full diplomatic relations, it will be inevitable for both Washington and Seoul to redefine the characteristics and role of US troops in Korea, at least in formality. Korea needs to work out appropriate measures to cope with all the possible changes in relations between Washington and North Korea. Sung-Han Kim, “Prospects for Changes in Korea-US Alliance and the Question of Korea's Security,” East Asian Review, Vol. VII, No. 4, Winter 1995, p. 18.
Korea and in Japan, and the direction of US-China relations vis-a-vis Korean unification.16

**An Inappropriate US Mediator Role**

The Seoul government needs to convince Washington to remain South Korea's ally rather than be a mediator between North and South. The Clinton administration might attempt to mediate between the two Koreas; for instance, there is no doubt that the US was still considered a de facto ally of Israel even after it played a successful mediator role in the conclusion of the Israel-Palestine peace agreement. The South Korea–US relationship, however, is very different from that between the US and Israel.

Thus, South Korea should convey to the United States that it is inappropriate for Washington to act as a mediator in inter-Korean relations. American policy towards the Korean peninsula assumes the existence of two Koreas and is related to US strategic relations with China. In short, the purpose of the ROK-US alliance is to guarantee a regional balance of power and the maintenance of peace on the Korean peninsula.

US policy towards North Korea has sought to keep intact the US-sponsored Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and to expand its American influence over Pyongyang so as to forge a solid base of influence in Northeast Asia. The United States has sought to improve relations with Pyongyang now that Russia and China have moved closer

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16 The future of Northeast Asia, particularly the Korean peninsula, hinges on the US-China relationship. China's rise to great-power status is the most important challenge facing the United States in Asia. A cooperative China would reinforce stability in the region and the foundations of Asian economic growth; an aggressive China would polarize the region. US policy should aim at working with other nations to bring China into the regional and global community on terms that conform with international standards on economic practices, human rights, and nonproliferation. To upgrade the policy of engagement, the US president should seek a full-scale summit meeting at least once a year with the Chinese leader regardless of the state of political relations. Regular cabinet-level meetings and exchanges between US and Chinese legislators should also be sought. See W. Michael Blumenthal et al., *Redressing the Balance: American Engagement with Asia* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996), p. 8.
to South Korea. It hopes to prevent the emergence of any hegemonic power other than itself in Northeast Asia and to retain its regional leadership. In other words, American policy toward North Korea is aimed at maintaining US dominance in Northeast Asia through expanding its influence over North Korea.

Much of this depends on progress in inter-Korean relations. Pyongyang has insisted on talking exclusively with the United States in order to drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington. South Korea, on the other hand, insists that it will not tolerate improved DPRK-US relations without progress in its own relations with the North. But the Clinton administration cannot abandon its policy of expanding influence over North Korea simply out of deference to South Korean wishes. Even if a North-South dialogue were to proceed before progress were made in North Korea–US relations, Washington seems to believe chances are slim that the two Koreas would be able to resolve their problems by themselves through direct talks. Therefore, the United States has cautiously offered to be a mediator between the two Koreas.

Meanwhile, Republicans in Congress have continued to emphasize the importance of the traditional ROK-US alliance, insisting that it take precedence over all other initiatives and that for the United States to play a mediating role would only serve to strengthen North Korea while increasing the risk of regional instability. With regard to policy towards Israel, for example, Republicans and Democrats both support a strong bilateral relationship. But Republicans have strongly objected to the administration’s attempts to strengthen US relations with Arab nations, and they apply the same logic to American policy toward the Korean peninsula.

President Clinton may hope he can preside over the signing of a peace agreement between the leaders of North and South Korea on the lawn of the White House during his second term. In international disputes, the United States has frequently offered its services as an “honest broker,” most recently involving disputes in Northern Ireland, the Middle East and Bosnia.

This kind of mediation, however, has its limits. China, for example, would react with fury if Washington were to try to be a mediator between Beijing and Taipei. If and when the United States decides to expand its relationship with North Korea, Seoul should ask Washington, “Engagement for whom?” and emphasize in no uncertain terms that
South Korea’s role is vital if American engagement with North Korea is to be a success. The ROK and the United States should promote their North Korea policies based on their common interests and with the bilateral military alliance as its foundation. Both countries should end the transitional period of bilateral relations that followed the end of the Cold War and move toward a consolidated South Korea–US alliance framework.

**Efforts for Alliance Consolidation**

South Korea and the US should make every effort to guide their alliance into a consolidation stage in which they frequently consult each other on bilateral as well as regional issues and seek agenda-building on the basis of convergence of interests between the two countries. To make this possible Seoul needs to manage well, through political leadership, its relationship with China and the increasing cynicism within its conservative middle class about the US.

In light of the above-mentioned environmental and structural conditions of the ROK-US alliance, a “comprehensive alliance” between South Korea and the United States needs to be built in order to meet the strategic and economic interests of both countries as well as to maintain peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Since the end of the Cold War, the two countries have gone through a transition period in which they reassessed the costs and benefits of maintaining the Cold War alliance in the post–Cold War era.

They have witnessed a dual structure in the international relations of Northeast Asia: while the international structure surrounding the Korean peninsula reflects the international relations of the post–Cold War period, the relations between the two Koreas remain frozen. Under these circumstances, South Korea and the United States have experienced a learning process through the North Korean nuclear problem, and have reached the conclusion to implement an engagement policy towards North Korea as well as to maintain the ROK-US alliance not only to deter the North Korean military threat but also to manage the power balance in Northeast Asia. The two countries now share the view that “The US-ROK security relationship will retain its value and importance as a key component of a new post–Cold War security environment in Northeast Asia even after North Korea is no longer a threat to the region.
because the alliance serves more broadly as an anchor for stability and prosperity in the region.\textsuperscript{17} This means that the alliance has entered a consolidation stage. The two nations frequently consult each other on bilateral as well as regional issues and seek agenda-building on the basis of convergence of interests between them. For the past six years of transition they have found one important area where their interests converge: South Korea, to secure its survival, and the US, to protect its leadership, need an equilibrium within the region. Disturbance of the order in Northeast Asia with the emergence of new hegemonic powers would threaten the American leadership position as well as the political independence of South Korea. Furthermore, it threatens the security of East Asia as a whole. This convergence of vital strategic interests with the US makes South Korea's position unique among Northeast Asian, even among all East Asian, countries.

However, convergence of interests does not always guarantee policy coordination. The US tends to react to a crisis rather than try to create a structure or institutional mechanism to prevent it. Korea, having neither the means nor the cultural/diplomatic tradition of balancing off foreign powers, had its relations with the outside world shuttled from the Sino-centric order to the Japanese colonial rule to the Cold War. The need to shape foreign relations in a polycentric fashion is now being thrust upon the South Korean people. Even so, since the equilibrium most conducive to ROK political autonomy is the one based on continued US participation in the East Asian security system, Seoul will continue to prefer to manage the regional equilibrium in alliance with the United States.

South Korea knows that improved US-DPRK relations will inevitably bring about qualitative changes in Seoul-Washington ties. Seoul also realizes that to maintain a leadership role in Northeast Asia the US cannot distance itself from the East Asian security setting, and that there exist many obstacles to be overcome for effective ROK-US policy coordination. Thus, in order to precipitate their convergence of interests

\textsuperscript{17} US Department of Defense, United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region (February 1995), pp. 26–29.
into effective policy coordination, both countries need to define and develop a partnership that goes well beyond their bilateral relationship. As President Clinton emphasized, the Korea-US relationship has made the Asia-Pacific region more secure, more prosperous, and freer. On the basis of their allegiances to democracy and the market economy, South Korea and the US should strive to develop a mature relationship. However, we need to remember that this relationship is no longer one premised solely on any external challenge or threat. The ROK-US alliance is grounded on the need to coordinate mutually beneficial relations. Though this relationship is based on common interests, it requires management, hence the need for frequent consultations and readjustments. When policy coordination begins to work effectively, the relationship will finally be labeled as a genuine partnership. This is the task the two countries must achieve at the consolidation stage of their alliance, thereby meeting step by step the new requirements of the new era and approximating a qualitative rather than quantitative alliance. Such an alliance could serve a broad spectrum of mutual interests, and such interests will be far more fully enhanced if the two maintain a highly interactive and collaborative security relationship than if they do not.  

In addition, one development that will have a significant impact on regional stability is the unification of Korea. A unified Korea is hardly likely to pose any threat to its neighbors, but depending on how it positions itself in relation to the major powers around the peninsula, it could generate a dialectic of mutual suspicion and bring about repetition of history. Here again, as with the question of the overall balance of power in the region, the maintenance of stability consists in the US role. The only major power capable of playing a security role in Korea without arousing suspicion of direct geopolitical ambition is the United States. This comes from both geography and history. In this context, a continuation of the Korea-US alliance will serve security on the peninsula as well as serve the unification process.

Multilateral Supplementary Measures

Finally, on the basis of the mutual security alliance between South Korea and the US, a cooperative security system for the Northeast Asian region needs to be created. While bilateral security arrangements will remain the backbone of Northeast Asian security for a considerable time, the emerging new order raises the need for such a multilateral setting as the Northeast Asia Security Dialogue (NEASED) that was proposed by the South Korean government in 1994. The ROK should try to make that feasible and should also participate actively in multilateral activities at the track-two level.

A multilateral security dialogue in Northeast Asia should be based on the following considerations:

- First, a multilateral security dialogue in Northeast Asia should for a considerable time be seen as a supplement to rather than as a substitute for the system of American bilateral alliances in the region. A fragile peace was maintained in Northeast Asia during the Cold War years as the US played a pivotal role in maintaining stability in the region. Its security commitment remains the linchpin of Northeast Asian security under the present power relations and strategic circumstances. In fact, the Clinton administration has emphasized the development of multilateral security dialogues in Asia that would supplement, but not supplant, American bilateral alliances and forward military presence.

- Secondly, a multilateral security dialogue in Northeast Asia should be pursued in a way consistent with and conducive to improved inter-Korean relations and reunification. As long as inter-Korean relations remain unstable, real peace and stability in the region will be remote. Tangible progress in inter-Korean relations should be the precondition to guaranteeing the stability of Northeast Asia. For South and North Korea, participation in such a multilateral security mechanism could contribute to establishing a solid peace regime on the peninsula. In the long term, it could help foster an environment favorable for peaceful unification. Although all the four surrounding powers appear less than vigorous in creating an atmosphere for it, the reunification of Korea could certainly remove the most serious potential *causus belli* in Northeast Asia.
Thirdly, a multilateral security dialogue in Northeast Asia would need to maintain a cooperative and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). A sub-regional security dialogue addressing Northeast Asian concerns would be fully compatible with the ARF. Although the ARF will continue to include in its discussions some items involving the Northeast Asian sub-region, a sub-regional dialogue would permit the major actors to address these issues in greater depth.

Finally, a gradual approach should be taken to build a common security framework in Northeast Asia. Given the historic realities as well as the differences in political systems and economic development among the countries in the region, only an approach based on gradualism and patience will contribute to building the blocks of a Northeast Asian home. Constructing a new order will have to begin with building confidence on the ruins of deep-seated animosities of the Cold War.

Given the rapidly changing environment on both global and regional levels, South Korea needs to reassess the basic assumptions and priorities of its foreign and security policies. External circumstances and internal developments will require Korea to exercise greater flexibility in its foreign relations and emphasize the need for a farsighted and multilateral approach to foreign policy in the years to come.

To solidify Seoul-Washington relations, South Korea should fully consider the role China is likely to play in the future as well as monitor carefully its own conservative middle class’s critical perception of the United States. Because Beijing assumes that South Korea, the United States and Japan may attempt to contain China, it does not want to see Washington encourage Japan to expand its military capability, nor does it want to see South Korea increase its role in Asia-Pacific security affairs by taking advantage of its alliance with the United States.

Many Americans believe that with the end of the Cold War most South Koreans are no longer friendly toward the United States and fail

to respond properly to reasonable demands for improved relations with Pyongyang or for a wider opening of South Korean markets. Under these circumstances, Korean political leaders must generate public support to ensure that the ROK-US alliance is able to absorb and manage demands on the part of the South Korean public for a readjustment of relations without jeopardizing peace and stability on the peninsula as well as in Northeast Asia.

In making such efforts, Seoul will be able to strengthen its alliance with the United States while developing leverage in its relations with Washington in the interest of achieving closer ties between the two allies.

**Conclusion**

Right after the Cold War the Bush administration implemented the East Asia Strategic Initiative (EASI), through which the number of US forces in East Asia was gradually reduced. Still, Europe and the Middle East were occupying the top stratum in foreign policy priorities. However, the North Korean nuclear problem that erupted right after Clinton was inaugurated elevated the US commitment in East Asia, thereby reconfirming the importance of the South Korea-US alliance. With the termination of the nuclear problem through the Geneva Agreement in 1994, American intervention in inter-Korean relations became more active, which has made the triangular relationship among the three countries more complex.

As the delicate issues such as food assistance to North Korea, the submarine infiltration incident and the four-party talks captured the headline of the news media, policy cooperation between South Korea and the US began to come under question. Thus, the South Korean government which has had to seek both domestic political support and maximization of national interests inevitably produced inconsistencies in its North Korea policy.

As mentioned before, US foreign policy, in particular, the Clinton administration’s policy of freezing North Korea’s nuclear program and easing tension on the Korean peninsula—both regarded as major diplomatic achievements of his first term—will be carried out in accordance with the global framework of US strategy toward Northeast Asia. Thus, whether the South Korean government will be able to step forward to
consolidate its alliance with the US through the engagement of North Korea will depend on whether it can display strategic wisdom rather than political will, and on whether how it can maintain a certain distance between foreign policy interests and domestic political considerations. Both South Korea and the US need to embrace a longer-term perspective.

It is high time for South Korea and the United States to consult each other on such issues as tension reduction on the peninsula, Korean unification, Korea-US relations after unification, etc. This is the way to make our long journey toward peace and stability in Northeast Asia safe and successful.