

U.S.-ROK Civil Society Ties: Dynamics and Prospects in a Post-Alliance World

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NOTE ≈ This essay is a revised version of a paper presented at the Korea Institute for Future Strategies (KiFS) and NBR conference, "A World without the U.S.-ROK Alliance: Thinking about 'Alternative Futures,'" Seoul, South Korea, September 10-11, 2007.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the relationship between the U.S.-ROK security alliance and the civil society ties linking the U.S. and South Korea and analyzes the likely impact on such ties in the event of the termination of the security alliance.

MAIN FINDINGS

The essay covers U.S.-ROK ties across five different sectors:

- *Private sector* ∼ Private sector ties between the U.S. and South Korea respond to economic and financial conditions rather than to a rise in regional security tensions. Following the establishment of a dialogue channel with North Korea in April of 2003, the Korean stock market appears to have decoupled from the North Korean nuclear issue.
- *Educational sector* ∼ The predominance of the U.S. as a destination for higher education and vehicle for social advancement within South Korean society has played a major role in solidifying grass-roots ties between the two countries.
- *Religious sector* ∼ Substantial religious networks have developed between the two countries, through which constituents are likely to advocate for the maintenance of close ties with the U.S. as a component of South Korea's long-term security strategy.
- *Civil society/NGO sector* ∼ The relationship of the U.S. military and South Korean civil society remains relatively antagonistic. The end of the alliance would deprive the activists of a focal point for protests against the alliance.
- *Media/public opinion sector* ∼ The South Korean public is currently concerned about a withdrawal of U.S. forces. The end of the alliance would be considered as a significant event that would require considerable adjustments in the world view of South Koreans.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Although the alliance makes both positive and negative contributions to how the people of the U.S. and South Korea view each other, the U.S.-ROK military alliance serves as an “unseen support beam” that has supported the growth of civil society ties. Cultural relations may well be a lagging indicator of the health of the broader relationship. If the alliance ended, the cultural relationship might take years to feel this impact.
- The absence of a bilateral alliance would reduce the number of policymakers, especially in the U.S., who have extensive experience of and a direct personal interest in South Korea.

To acknowledge the role of civil society as a significant component of the U.S.-ROK relationship is to recognize the transformation in South Korea's domestic governance resulting from the country's transition from authoritarianism to democracy in the late 1980s. South Korea's democratization and economic development are primary factors behind a gradual convergence of social systems and democratic values between the United States and South Korea. Another result of these developments, however, is that leading South Korean civil society organizations have subjected the alliance to greater scrutiny regarding the relative priorities of the two sides and have demanded greater transparency regarding the internal workings of the security alliance, which has traditionally been managed by a small coterie of military specialists and senior diplomats on each side. That the alliance would find itself challenged by South Korean civil sector demands for more transparent management of the relationship is ironic, given that the existence of close security ties under the U.S.-ROK security alliance has been an invisible support beam that has enabled the development of the civil sector and served as a foundation for the development of non-governmental ties between the two countries.

South Korea had already been firmly linked to the United States long before the country's democratic transition through the establishment of the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty in 1954 and because an open U.S. market was the primary destination for exports that drove South Korea's economic transformation during the 1960s and 1970s from a "basket case" to a leading industrialized economy. Grass-roots ties and interaction with the U.S. system—through individual exchange programs in various fields, exposure to U.S. media through the Armed Forces Network, side-by-side military service with American counterparts, and opportunities for higher education in the United States—played a background role in the development of South Korean civil society, thereby encouraging South Korea's democratic transition. The contribution of the security alliance to the development of, and the role of the U.S. government in promoting, South Korea's democratization remains contested, however. As a result, South Korean civil society actors view the role of the United States and its relationship to South Korea's democratization with great ambivalence.¹

Although the establishment of the alliance pre-dated both South Korea's democratization and the rise of civil society as an influence in the country's

¹ See David Adesnik and Michael McFaul, "Engaging Autocratic Allies to Promote Democracy," *Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 7–26; and Sun-hyuk Kim and Wonhyuk Lim, "How to Deal with South Korea," *Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 71–82.

domestic politics, South Korean civil society organizations cannot be ignored as an increasingly important factor in alliance management, even if alliance issues are predominantly the responsibility of the two governments. The role of civil society as an influence on the U.S.-ROK relationship has steadily grown more relevant as NGOs have become influential actors with the ability to affect ROK government policies.

The term “civil society” itself is usually defined as the sphere of voluntary NGOs that join together to work for the collective good within a society (the “third sector,” as opposed to government or business). For the purposes of this analysis of the implications for U.S.-ROK relations of a “post-alliance world,” this essay will also include the media and the private sector as important actors, even though the private sector and media organizations are not usually included as a part of civil society.

This essay will review the major non-governmental actors in South Korea and their ties to the United States, the roles and contributions of civil society to U.S.-ROK relations, and the influence of civil society actors on the alliance. The essay will also assess the relationship and relative influence of civil society on alliance management and the implications for major non-governmental sectors if the alliance were to be dissolved.

- ≈ pp. 46–47 examine the U.S.-ROK security alliance’s background and contribution to the formation of relations and exchanges in various sectors between South Korea and the United States
- ≈ pp. 48–58 outline the development of South Korea’s major civil society groups broadly defined, identify the role these groups play in the two countries’ larger bilateral relations, and address the direct or indirect relationship between these groups and the security alliance
- ≈ pp. 58–59 conclude the essay with both an analysis of South Korean civil society in the event that the security alliance ceases to exist and an assessment of the implications for ties between the United States and South Korea

SECURITY ALLIANCE, DEVELOPMENT OF U.S.-ROK RELATIONS, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Non-governmental U.S.-ROK ties have traditionally lagged in importance behind the respective roles of the governments in defining the relationship between the two countries. U.S. involvement in the occupation of Korea and the U.S. decision to enter Korean War under UN auspices to defend South Korea against North Korean aggression led to a much closer relationship among the United States and South Korea than would otherwise have been

the case. The existence of the alliance enabled a wide array of personal exchanges, business relationships, and civil society interactions between the two countries that would probably not have developed otherwise, given the geographic distance and cultural and socio-economic differences between the United States and South Korea at the time.

The alliance therefore provided the infrastructure for political, economic, and cultural interactions that would not have developed had South Korea not become a geo-strategic priority for the United States during the Cold War. The interaction was primarily government-driven in the service of the alliance commitment, as hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers rotated through South Korea each decade and U.S. embassy officials managed international development programs designed to keep South Korea's economy afloat. Military-sponsored outreach programs to local communities provided Americans and Koreans with opportunities to interact on a limited basis. During the 1960s and 1970s the U.S. Peace Corps provided a limited but significant sphere for person-to-person interaction, as young American professionals learned about Korea through efforts to improve South Korea's health and education infrastructure; many of these individuals have played long-term roles in promoting positive cultural and educational exchanges.

The governments played a leading role in shaping opportunities for Koreans to come to the United States on exchange programs or to pursue higher-level educational opportunities. The KATUSA (Korean Augmentation to the U.S. Army) program, involving select Korean military staff (often individuals who were well-connected or on a fast-track within South Korean society), provided Koreans with first-hand opportunities to experience American systems and an American working environment. U.S. government-funded educational opportunities, the Asia Foundation, the Fulbright program, and university-based scholarship programs played important roles in building South Korea's human capacity, which in turn stimulated public sector development and contributed to improved governance. Through the largesse of a wide range of scholarship programs, many of which were developed because of the alliance, South Korea's intellectual elite was largely trained in the United States and returned to lead South Korea's economic and political development. Yet the relationship has now expanded far beyond the security alliance to encompass many spheres; military ties are no longer the prerequisite for healthy U.S.-ROK relations.

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS, THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE, AND BEYOND

Major actors in the non-governmental relationship include the private sector, the education sector (the leading edge of grass-roots person-to-person exchanges), religious organizations, NGOs, and the mass media (which is a major influence on public opinion and attitudes on each side).

Private Sector Exchange

The business relationship between the United States and South Korea initially grew out of links resulting from military ties as well as from development assistance after the Korean War. South Korea's economic situation also benefited from the economic presence provided by U.S. bases in the immediate aftermath of the war. South Korea's export-led development under Park Chung-hee relied on the United States as a primary market for the export of South Korean goods. Many of the capital and technology inputs in support of this development strategy came from Japan, which also benefited from exporting to South Korea.

Given the relatively small size of South Korea's economy in the initial stages of the country's economic take-off, major U.S. firms did not begin to take notice of South Korea as a potential market for U.S. goods until the 1980s. At that time, ROK import barriers turned into a source of friction, which grew into a political issue in the late 1980s as the U.S. government, with support from the U.S. private sector, pressured South Korea to adopt more liberalized economic policies. Disputes over opening South Korea's market coincided with a wave of anti-U.S. sentiment around the 1988 Seoul Olympics that also was expressed as resentment toward the asymmetrical nature of the security alliance.

During this period the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Korea (AmCham) had a reputation of being antagonistic toward protectionist South Korean government policies that limited foreign firms' opportunities to enter South Korea's closed domestic consumer market. Following the Asian financial crisis, however, the wide gap between the structures of the two economies and differing views regarding the role of the state in promoting economic growth narrowed. The financial crisis also initiated a transformation in ROK policy toward much greater openness and liberalization in the consumer, financial, and equity markets. A by-product of the South Korean government's decisions to open markets more widely to foreign equity and capital investment in order to recover from the crisis was that AmCham became perceived as a friend and

even as an advocate for Seoul's interests in Washington, including the need for the continuation of the security alliance to bolster U.S. economic interests in South Korea.

How does the private sector interact with the security alliance? There is a widespread assumption that the two are closely connected and that foreign investment is unsustainable on the peninsula without U.S.-guaranteed deterrence of North Korean aggression. At an AmCham breakfast meeting held in Seoul with then U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in November 2003, a participant asked whether U.S. security guarantees as "a critical issue for guaranteeing that [foreign investor] confidence" were being weakened by reductions in the level of United States Forces Korea (USFK). Rumsfeld responded that he was sensitive to issues of business confidence and that USFK reconfiguration would enhance U.S. capabilities and strengthen the U.S. commitment to the defense of South Korea.² It is no longer clear that the business confidence of investors in South Korea is directly correlated with the security alliance.

One measure of the diminished influence of rising security tensions on private sector confidence is the reaction of the South Korean stock market (the KOSPI) to both the North Korean nuclear crisis and the reconfiguration of the USFK in South Korea. On October 17, 2002, the KOSPI rose to 644.66, despite news that North Korea had admitted developing nuclear weapons and a same-day downturn on Wall Street.³ On January 10, 2003, when North Korea announced the country's withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the market showed volatility within an hour of the announcement but ended up only slightly lower at 628.36.⁴ Moody's Investors Service's downgrade of South Korea's ratings outlook from "positive" to "negative" on February 13, 2003, jolted the market, which closed at 575.98 on concerns over geopolitical risks, but local analysts assessed that the influence of the downgrade would be "temporary" and "marginal" in light of solid economic fundamentals. Following the establishment of a dialogue channel with North Korea in April of 2003, however, the Korean stock market appears to have decoupled from lingering concerns over the North Korean nuclear issue, as the KOSPI has barely registered any reaction to North Korea's attempts to escalate the crisis.

² "Remarks by Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld at American Chamber of Commerce Joint Breakfast Meeting," U.S. Department of Defense, Briefing, Federal News Service, November 18, 2003.

³ "Seoul Stocks Advance for 5th Straight Day," *Korea Times*, October 18, 2002.

⁴ "NK's Nuclear Threat Spooks Stocks in Seoul," *Korea Times*, January 11, 2003.

The *Financial Times* seemed prescient in the assessment that “investors in Northeast Asia have tended to ignore the threat posed by North Korea to the stability of the region and their money” but proved to be less sure-footed in the prediction that “fund managers can no longer ignore the geopolitical risks attached to their investments in South Korea and Japan.”⁵ The KOSPI reached the 1,000 level on February 25, 2005, and topped 1,500 on April 8, 2007, almost tripling the index’s capitalization value despite the protracted nuclear crisis, including North Korea’s February 2005 announcement that the country possessed nuclear weapons capability, the July 2006 missile tests, and the October 2006 nuclear test. Tellingly, foreign investors bought heavily to arrest the KOSPI’s fall during trading even before the end of the day of the nuclear test.⁶ The KOSPI’s rise has stimulated recent analysis that the “Korean discount,” the relatively lower capitalization of Korean assets compared to assessments of their real worth owing to concerns about tensions on the peninsula, is gradually fading away despite the North Korean nuclear imbroglio remaining unresolved.⁷ Based on an analysis of market responses following ten events related to the North Korean nuclear crisis, the *Korea Times* reported that foreign investors took net buying positions in half of the cases and net selling positions in half of the cases. The market sustained a loss during the week following new nuclear-related events in only one case: the week following North Korea’s decision to remove IAEA seals from the Yongbyon nuclear facilities in December 2002.⁸

A separate but related question is whether the withdrawal of U.S. troops—or a sharp spike in tensions with North Korea—might have a dramatically negative effect on foreign investment in South Korea in the future. Future of the Alliance (FOTA) and Security Policy Initiative (SPI) negotiations over the reconfiguration of the U.S. presence, including a reduced level of U.S. forces on the Korean peninsula, occurred regularly during 2003–07. At no point was there a public suggestion that these negotiations had an influence on the behavior of Korean equity markets. The data presented above clearly suggest that reconfiguring the USFK in South Korea and the de-linking of the level of U.S. troop presence from the North Korean nuclear crisis, as well

⁵ Andrew Ward, “Funds Yet to Wake Up to Korean Threat,” *Financial Times*, March 11, 2003, 26.

⁶ “Moody’s Downgrade Jolts Financial Market,” *Korea Times*, February 13, 2007; “KOSPI Closes at 18-Month High Despite Hiccups,” *Korea Times*, December 29, 2003; “Stock Market Enters 4-Digit Era,” *Korea Times*, February 26, 2005; “KOSPI Surges Above 1,500,” *Korea Times*, April 9, 2007; and Song Jung-A, Tom Mitchell, and Tony Tassell, “Markets’ Reaction to N. Korea is Muted,” *Financial Times*, October 10, 2006, 42.

⁷ Hyong-ki Park, “Korea Discount’ Shows Signs of Easing Now,” *Korea Times*, July 6, 2007.

⁸ Jae-hyun Cho, “Time for Cool-Headed Investment,” *Korea Times*, October 12, 2006.

as North Korean crisis escalation tactics, have had a minimal influence on investor confidence in South Korea's equity markets. South Korean analyses of factors affecting levels of inward direct foreign investment during this period do not even take into account Korea's division as a factor.⁹ Unless the end of the U.S.-ROK security alliance is tied to a significant downturn in the overall U.S.-ROK political relationship, there is no evidence that significant events related to the North Korean nuclear crisis are directly influencing private sector relations between the two countries.

Educational Exchange

Another sphere in which relationships between people in the United States and South Korea have flourished is the educational exchange sector. Note that South Korean students have flocked to U.S. universities and graduate programs in recent decades. The Institute of International Education reports that 58,847 South Korean students enrolled in U.S. universities during the 2005–06 academic year, a 10.3% increase over the previous year. Korean students now represent the third largest foreign student group in the United States, trailing only India and China.¹⁰ Over 93,000 Korean students at all education levels are reported to be in the United States. Korean students' desire to take the TOEFL suggests that demand for a U.S. education will continue to rise.¹¹ On a per capita basis, South Korean students are more likely to come to the United States for educational purposes than students from any other country in the world. Individuals with higher degrees from U.S. universities are widely competitive for the top jobs in South Korea, to the extent that people with PhDs from other countries, or even from Korea, feel that they are at a disadvantage.

The Bush administration has recently authorized South Korea to join the visa waiver program as early as 2008. The end of mandatory tourist visas will likely enhance ties and promote additional exchanges between the United States and South Korea, broadening and deepening common experiences and grass-roots relationships between the two peoples. Although the security alliance may be a legacy of the past relationship, such ties are no longer the centerpiece. Unless the atmosphere between the two governments turns sour,

⁹ Kwon-yul Oh, "Foreign Direct Investment in Korea: A Foreign Perspective," Korea Economic Research Institute, 2003 \approx http://www.keri.org/eng/board/skin/Eng/Eng_List.asp.

¹⁰ "Open Doors Online Report 2006," Institute of International Education \approx http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/file_depot/0-10000000/0-10000/3390/folder/50084/Open+Doors+2006_FastFacts_FINAL.pdf.

¹¹ Sy-hyun Lee, "South Koreans Jostle to Take an English Test," *New York Times*, May 17, 2007, 12.

the convergence of values between rising generations in South Korea and the United States will continue, even if political differences complicating the management of the relationship were to arise.

Religious Exchange

South Korea has had extensive interactions with the United States on an unofficial level through religious exchange—a topic that does not usually receive significant attention but has played an important role through the construction of an informal network of institutional ties among church leaders, especially among Protestants. Aware of the rapidly growing Korean Christian population, U.S. missionaries initially took the lead in such exchanges in the 1970s and 1980s. Likewise, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints developed a strong network in South Korea. Subsequently, however, the interaction has become more balanced as prominent Korean church leaders have risen to take leadership roles in international denominational networks and other religious institutions. For instance, Korean mega-church pastor Billy Kim led the Baptist World Alliance from 2000–05. Although many of these networks at the international level appear to have symbolic rather than practical significance, their existence has at times been closely related to the alliance, and the networks have been partially mobilized to serve common objectives related to North Korea. In response to the North Korean famine, for example, faith-based organizations like World Vision mobilized dual approaches through South Korean and non-Korean networks in response to the crisis. World Vision's response to North Korea's humanitarian crisis was initially led internationally due to the poor state of inter-Korean relations, but as the inter-Korean situation improved, World Vision Korea has taken the lead in responding to the humanitarian situation in North Korea.

South Korea's two Catholic cardinals receive considerable veneration, and their rare comments on political matters are treated seriously, a legacy of the credibility that the Catholic church earned during the authoritarian period of the 1970s and 1980s as a safe haven for student and labor activists. The World Council of Churches and other progressive religious denominations, many of which had previously worked together in opposing human rights violations under South Korea's authoritarian rule, have been at the forefront of promoting engagement with North Korea.¹² Many South Korean progressives, including

¹² For additional information on the role of religious organizations in anti-Park demonstrations in the 1970s, see Sunhyuk Kim, *The Politics of Democratization in Korea: The Role of Civil Society* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 60–61.

South Korea's current Minister of Unification Jae-joung Lee, an ordained Episcopalian minister, remain closely connected through progressive religious networks dedicated to enhanced relations with North Korea. Many of these groups are strong critics of U.S. policy toward North Korea.

Conservative religious leaders have also attempted to mobilize international networks to oppose North Korea's human rights situation and pursuit of nuclear weapons. The human rights issue has galvanized organizations, such as the Commission to Help North Korean Refugees founded by former Seoul mayor Kim Sang-chul, to network internationally in order to gain attention and support for this issue. Kim's organization has actively worked with the UK-based Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) to bring international attention to North Korean refugee needs. Many Korean religious conservatives are vocally pro-U.S. and pro-alliance, most notably in response to the anti-U.S. spike in public sentiment that occurred in 2003.

These religious networks have little direct connection to the security alliance and would probably continue to develop even in the face of its dissolution. A review of these types of religious networks, however, illustrates both the complexity of South Korea's international connections and the extent to which South Korea has internalized Judeo-Christian and democratic values. Although right and left may fight over the expression of these values, the legacy of South Korea's democratization is far deeper than often apparent, and the growth of international Christian religious networks on both sides of the political spectrum is a testament to the long-term influence on South Korea of Western missionaries, an association that predated but has been reinforced by the security alliance. The embrace of common values by Korean Christian leaders on both the political right and left strongly suggests that cultural or geostrategic factors will not squelch deep strains within South Korean society that identify primarily with core Western values. Even if the U.S.-ROK alliance were to end, a substantial body of connections through religious networks would remain, leaving a strongly committed plurality of constituents likely both to contest ROK policy directions inconsistent with these core values and to advocate the restoration of close ties as a critical component of the country's long-term security strategy.

South Korean Civil Society and U.S.-ROK Relations

When the United States entered into Korea following the end of World War II, U.S. forces perceived the bottom-up hierarchy as being too close to communist influence. According to Sunhyuk Kim, the U.S. Army's mobilization

into Korea “terminated the dominance of the bottom-up organizations and dramatically changed the whole political landscape in Korea,” leading the U.S. military and ROK civil society actors to have an antagonistic relationship from the arrival of U.S. forces in Korea in 1945.¹³

The antagonistic relationship between the USFK and South Korean civil society continued to be a flashpoint for cultural differences. There developed a reservoir of widespread public resentment over perceived U.S. “arrogance” connected with the prerogatives USFK has assumed along with its responsibilities for ensuring South Korea’s national defense. The U.S. presence was a necessity but was also a burden; Seoul was so close to the DMZ that the U.S. priorities stemming from the war persisted as the armistice turned into a cold peace. Korean journalist Won-ki Choi questions whether the anti-U.S. attitudes—which reached a peak in 2003 after an accident in which two South Korean middle school girls were killed by a U.S. military vehicle—should be correctly categorized as “anti-Americanism” or “anti-baseism.” Choi notes that “South Koreans are passionate about their dislike of the way they are treated by the U.S. military stationed on their land.”¹⁴ Basing is one reason why the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and environmental issues concerning land returned by USFK to the ROK government continue to be such sensitive issues in the alliance. U.S. military vehicles did not require permission from local jurisdictions to utilize South Korean public roads or highways, and the U.S. camp network remained scattered throughout Korea’s largest cities until the establishment of the Land Partnership Plan, which returned many of these U.S. bases in 2001. In contrast, U.S. military consolidation in Japan took place in the early 1970s.

In Korea’s prior authoritarian context, citizens had little redress or outlets for complaints. Since the democratic transition, however, more critiques have emerged, often expressed as anti-U.S. sentiment. Katherine Moon has detailed the challenges that the most vulnerable members of Korean society faced in camp towns on the edge of U.S. bases. In a changing domestic social context and in light of a remarkable economic transformation, USFK has occasionally become a focal point for Korean frustrations.¹⁵ USFK has not been quick to adjust to the new environment. South Korean NGOs now have

¹³ Kim, *The Politics of Democratization in Korea*, 26–27; and Bruce Cumings, *Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

¹⁴ Brent (Won-ki) Choi, “Anti-Americanism or ‘Anti-Baseism,’” in *Korean Attitudes toward the United States: Changing Dynamics*, ed. David I. Steinberg (Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, 2005), 309.

¹⁵ Katherine H.S. Moon, “Citizen Power in Korean-American Relations,” in Steinberg, *Korean Attitudes toward the United States*, 233–45.

a louder voice and greater leverage to press their case within society through the media or even through lobbying of government officials, many of whom in the progressive Roh Moo-hyun administration may have come from NGOs. The result is that management of alliance issues is considerably more difficult today than in the past when the two governments or militaries could settle issues in a closed-door meeting or through personal ties.

Korea's economic growth has changed the circumstances for USFK into a situation in which the U.S. military is viewed more as a social liability that damages living standards than as a guarantor of security and prosperity. The challenge of managing these day-to-day issues has been a catalyst for transnational cooperation among anti-base citizens' groups; this cooperation arises because South Korean NGOs face the same types of challenges in living with the U.S. military as their Japanese counterparts in Okinawa. Sharing of tactics and information has strengthened the anti-base movement and put the U.S. military under greater pressure to develop global standards both for management of SOFA and for implementing environmental standards.¹⁶

On the issue of North Korean human rights, organizations such as the South Korea based Citizens Alliance for Human Rights in North Korea (with funding from the National Endowment for Democracy) have helped to spearhead a growing international coalition of NGOs dedicated to promoting change in the North Korea's human rights situation and governance. On an issue-by-issue basis, Koreans who have spent time in the United States have brought back the experiences, examples, or analysis of the advocacy methods that U.S. civil society counterparts have used to advocate for their issues in an American context. The limited use of English among Korean civil society groups, however, has meant that there remain relatively few issue-based transnational NGO linkages between the United States and South Korea. Unlike NGOs in the Philippines that have actively sought out ties with like-minded groups in the international community, Korean NGOs have been primarily home-grown and have been slow to build international coalitions. Although Korean civil society groups have a wide array of non-governmental counterparts in the United States, the language barrier and geographic distance appears to have inhibited the development of close NGO ties.

The end of the alliance would deprive the activists of a focal point for some of their protests. Note, however, that anti-U.S. activism remains on the periphery of South Korean NGO concerns, which generally fall much closer to

¹⁶ Sheila Smith, *Shifting Terrain: The Domestic Politics of the U.S. Military Presence in Asia* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2006).

home. A key concern for these activists is policy advocacy regarding domestic political and quality of life issues in South Korea, areas where there is no special need to build international coalitions. To the extent that progressive Korean NGOs have linked up with U.S. counterparts, for instance, to protest war or specific instances of military cooperation and mobilization between the United States and South Korea, the end of the alliance would deprive such groups of opportunities for deeper cooperation.

Media, Public Opinion, and U.S.-ROK Relations

The expanded role of the media as an influence on South Korean public opinion—and by extension on the security alliance—is another by-product of South Korea's democratic transition. Under authoritarian rule, the ROK government used the media as an instrument to influence public opinion on issues involving the security alliance. Following South Korea's democratic transition, however, the media became a powerful actor independent of the government. Strongly influenced by South Korean civil society advocacy, the media has in turn become a major shaper of South Korean public opinion.

A classic case of the ROK government's use of the media to influence South Korean public opinion was Chun Doo Hwan's suppression of U.S. statements regarding the Kwangju Incident in May and June of 1980. Despite U.S. condemnation of Chun's forcible assumption of power and his suppression of a citizen uprising, the views of a generation of South Koreans toward the United States were distorted by Chun's suppression of any U.S. criticism from appearing in the local media.¹⁷ This incident is perhaps the most significant event affecting South Korean views on the alliance.

Following South Korea's democratic transition, the South Korean media's willingness to challenge powerful individuals and institutions within society has grown, making the media an institution capable of decisively influencing public opinion. The media has been an effective vehicle by which civil society activists can rally public opinion and thereby challenge the most entrenched and unwelcome aspects of the alliance. On many issues related to the U.S.-ROK security alliance, therefore, the way in which the media frames the issues at hand is an important influence on the formation of public opinion.

Ultimately, South Korean public attitudes are likely to be a highly important factor in shaping the sustainability of the alliance or popular attitudes toward the United States in a post-alliance context. A

¹⁷ William H. Gleysteen, Jr., *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 66, 144–46.

comprehensive review of South Korean public opinion conducted by the RAND Corporation in 2003 shows that South Koreans have consistently recognized the importance of the U.S. troop presence and that seven people in ten believe that U.S. forces should remain in South Korea for at least five years or more.¹⁸ In 2004 the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the East Asian Institute co-sponsored a bi-national survey on attitudes toward the U.S.-ROK relationship that revealed South Korean concern over “perceived U.S. unilateralism, especially how it relates to American use of force.”¹⁹ The survey showed that most South Koreans think both that the United States has more influence on ROK foreign policy than any single actor in South Korea’s own government and that the U.S. presence is beneficial to South Korea’s security. Fifty-three percent selected the United States as South Korea’s preferred partner in international affairs.

According to this survey, the future of the U.S.-ROK security alliance is contested within South Korean society. Note that 32% of South Koreans preferred a continuation of the status quo; 37% (a slight plurality of respondents) preferred a stronger relationship with the United States; and 31% wanted South Korea to take a more independent role in foreign affairs.²⁰ The Fulbright program sponsored a 2007 poll of more than a thousand Koreans that showed that 92% of respondents believe the U.S.-ROK alliance should be maintained or strengthened, while only 8% say that the alliance should be weakened or terminated. In that poll, 20% of the participants chose China as the country with which South Korea should maintain close ties for the sake of national interests, while 79% chose the United States.²¹

These numbers suggest that the South Korean public would be concerned under current circumstances over a withdrawal of U.S. forces. The figures also suggest that the end of the alliance would be considered a significant event that would require considerable adjustments in the worldview of South Koreans. On the one hand, South Koreans might welcome the potential added autonomy and independence that would accompany the end of the alliance. On the other hand, the population remains aware of and insecure about the

¹⁸ Eric V. Larson, Norman D. Levin, Seonhae Baik, and Bogdan Savych, *Ambivalent Allies: A Study of South Korean Attitudes toward the U.S.* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2004), 51–65 ~ http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/2005/RAND_TR141.pdf.

¹⁹ “Global Views 2004: Comparing South Korean and American Public Opinion and Foreign Policy,” The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 2004, 7 ~ http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/POS_Topline%20Reports/POS%202004/2004%20US_Korea%20Comparative%20Global_Views.pdf.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Haesook Chae and Steven Kim, “Not the South Korea We Thought We Knew,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 13, 2007.

country's geopolitical neighborhood, particularly the possibility of a rise in rivalry between South Korea's two geographically closest neighbors, Japan and China.

The end of the alliance would probably have a significant impact on public opinion in South Korea. The end of the alliance would hardly spell the end of the U.S.-ROK relationship, however, given the extensive personal networks and mutual opportunities that have developed in each of the spheres mentioned above. In this respect, the U.S. experience with the Philippines is instructive. Although anti-U.S. sentiment was an important factor in the Philippine legislature's decision to call for the dissolution of the U.S.-Philippine security alliance in the early 1990s, that decision did not mean the end of the U.S.-Philippine relationship. Despite a relative downward adjustment in the political profile of the Philippines in Washington, D.C., many aspects of the U.S.-Philippine relationship at a grass-roots level continue to thrive.

CONCLUSIONS

This essay has attempted to review the interactions between the U.S.-ROK security alliance and Korean civil society, broadly defined. The essay has shown that while the existence of the alliance served as an invisible foundational support beam for the development of a wide range of grass-roots level interactions, South Korea's democratization and the deepening of civil society organizations within South Korea were not directly tied to the existence of the security alliance.

South Korea's democratic transition has brought dramatic development of civil society organizations that desire greater transparency and responsiveness in many areas, including the management of the U.S.-ROK security relationship. Educational and religious exchanges were stimulated by the existence of the alliance, but the alliance is hardly relevant to expansion in these spheres. South Korean NGO activity has boomed with the country's democratic consolidation. The major focus of these organizations has been generally on advocating social change within South Korea; to the extent that the U.S. military presence has been seen as an obstacle to South Korea's social betterment, the alliance has fueled NGO activity through demonstrations and other forms of criticism. South Korean society increasingly debates and contests issues related to the U.S. presence. Overall public opinion, however, remains supportive of the continuation of a U.S. security presence on the Korean Peninsula, even as the public desires greater transparency and accountability in the management of the security relationship.

What would the U.S.-ROK relationship look like in the absence of an alliance? The above analysis suggests that the existence or absence of a security alliance between the United States and South Korea would probably not have a decisive impact on civil society interactions across all spheres; the end of the alliance (and more specifically the U.S. military presence in Korea) would actually remove a concern shared by South Korean NGOs working to bring greater transparency and accountability to the U.S.-ROK military relationship.

Yet the existence of the alliance as the basis for building such a broad array of educational, religious, NGO, and private sector interactions between the United States and South Korea also carries a type of unexpected convergence and momentum between the two countries through the promotion of common values. Korea's democratic transition has facilitated this convergence, but the more profound influence lies with the educational heritage of Koreans trained in the United States to lead their own society. A second influence lies in the religious heritage of a population that contains a plurality of Christians who identify strongly with the United States not only as a protector but also both as a model worthy of emulation and as a partner worthy of continued cultivation. Even with the end of the alliance, these influences in Korean society suggest that despite China's cultural and geopolitical centripetal attractions, a significant portion of South Koreans will continue to look to the United States for partnership, leadership, and inspiration. ◆