



# Asia Pacific Bulletin

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## Is a Strategic Alignment Possible for South Korea and China? BY HYONJOO YOO

**Hyon Joo Yoo**, visiting fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “Since the U.S.-ROK alliance is beneficial in maintaining peace on the Korean peninsula, neither China nor South Korea wants to move toward nullifying the alliance, not to mention creating an alternative security institution, in the foreseeable future.”

During a 2008 summit meeting, China and South Korea (Republic of Korea or ROK) agreed to develop their relationship into a “strategic partnership.” This agreement reflects their confidence in improved economic, political, and cultural relations, and also implies their willingness to handle a range of issues related to regional security. For instance, the two governments are now discussing a free trade agreement and an institutionalized strategic dialogue.

Pundits have argued that as Sino-ROK relations increase, the alliance between the United States and South Korea might eventually be undermined, compelling South Korea to choose between the United States and China as its long-term strategic partner. Is it possible that increased cooperation between China and the ROK is conducive to strategic collaboration that will overshadow the ROK’s relationship with the United States?

Despite recent gains in Sino-ROK relations, there are still many challenges to face if China and South Korea are to achieve a strategic alignment. In the short term, neither China nor South Korea wants the U.S.-ROK alliance to disappear because it serves the interests of both Beijing and Seoul. First, the Chinese government sees the U.S.-ROK alliance as helping to manage the provocations of North Korea. Since maintaining regional stability is important for continued economic development, China cannot ignore the positive influence of the U.S.-ROK alliance in preserving the stability of the Korean peninsula and thus implicitly accepts the existence of the alliance.

Second, South Korea also believes that maintaining the alliance with the United States is critical because of the existence of North Korean threats. According to a survey conducted by Korea Gallop in 2008, more than 93 percent of respondents in South Korea did not trust the North Korean regime and more than 71 percent believed that the North would not give up its nuclear weapons. In the same survey, respondents selected the United States as the closest partner for South Korea. The ROK government has consistently emphasized the importance of the alliance: even when liberal leaders headed the government, South Korea was one of a few allies that proactively supported the U.S. strategy to rebuild Iraq and Afghanistan. Since the U.S.-ROK alliance is beneficial in maintaining peace on the Korean peninsula, neither China nor South Korea wants to move toward nullifying the alliance, not to mention creating an alternative security institution, in the foreseeable future. This suggests, however, that China and South Korea might feel more comfortable about a continental alliance in a post-North Korea era, while the U.S.-ROK alliance might need to seek *raison d’être*.

Nevertheless, there are also longer-term considerations that may make it difficult to forge a security agreement between Beijing and Seoul. First, China and South Korea



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may become entangled in territorial disputes. Some historians in South Korea claim that an area called Gando, Chinese territory adjacent to North Korea, belongs to Korea, arguing that imperial Japan illegally handed it over to China. Although the ROK government disapproves of calls to reclaim this territory, China seems concerned that ethnic Korean-Chinese citizens of China residing close to the Korean peninsula might support Korea's territorial claim, especially if a unified Korea were to emerge. Although the issue is not pressing, it may constitute a cause of friction between the two countries in the future.

Second, China and South Korea share similar views on Japan because both have unpleasant memories of Japanese expansion during World War II. Both countries are concerned about the growing military role of Japan in Asia and seem to have a similar strategic interest in keeping Japanese military capability in check. However, it is not clear whether the similar historical experience will be enough to tie China and South Korea together in a security alignment in order to isolate Japan since such a coalition might speed up Japan's militarization plans in response.

Third, current South Korean cooperation with China is based mostly on its calculation that China can perform positively when dealing with North Korea. Beijing is perceived to wield some influence on Pyongyang, since China accounts for approximately 75 percent of North Korea's trade, provides an estimated one million tons per annum of food aid, and is a consistent energy supplier to North Korea. Although some people question the extent of China's leverage over North Korea, from Seoul's point of view, Beijing still functions as a useful hand to preclude Pyongyang's brazen behavior. South Korean leaders seem to pay more attention to how and when China is helpful during the process of denuclearizing North Korea than to whether or not China's actions demonstrate that it has any real influence. After North Korea's rocket tests in April 2009, former Korean President Kim Dae-Jung noted that the ROK had high expectations for China in persuading North Korea to resolve nuclear problems. Current President Lee Myung-Bak also called on the cooperation of China to end the North Korean nuclear program soon after the North's nuclear test in May 2009.

Importantly, the imminence of North Korean threats generates an interesting phenomenon. While other countries discuss the possibility of China's rise as a threat to Asian security, South Korea has been relatively quiet on this subject. Since North Korea constitutes the major threat to South Korea, the Chinese role in restraining the North is useful to Seoul and thus overrides concerns about potential threats coming from China. In other words, South Korea perceives the China threat as latent due to the existence of more immediate North Korean threats. Nevertheless, although the China threat is not currently appreciated in South Korea, it is unclear whether this situation will continue in a future where North Korea is no longer a security concern. This change will be a grave obstacle for future Sino-ROK security alignment.

Considering the challenges ahead, one can conclude that security collaboration between China and South Korea seems unlikely. In the short term, the United States is critical for Sino-ROK relations since Beijing and Seoul acknowledge that the development of their relationship is based in part on the U.S. role in Asia's security. Moreover, although China and South Korea share strategic interests at present, there is no guarantee that they will continue doing so in the longer term. Particularly, it is not clear how far China and South Korea can develop their relationship if the North Korea threat dissipates. This leaves leeway for the United States to continue developing the alliance with South Korea and maintaining stability in Asia.