

# CONGRESSIONAL ATTITUDES ON THE FUTURE OF THE U.S.–SOUTH KOREA RELATIONSHIP

A Report of the International Security Program  
Center for Strategic and International Studies



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## Preface

From 2006 to 2007, with support from the Korea Foundation, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) conducted a year-long study of congressional attitudes regarding the Korean peninsula, focusing especially on how these attitudes might affect the future of the U.S.–South Korea security relationship.

This report, which is the chief product of that project, identifies trends in congressional views of South Korea and offers recommendations for reducing the likelihood that relations between the U.S. Congress and the Republic of Korea (ROK) will deteriorate. In addition to document research, this study has drawn on extensive interviews with American experts on Congress, former and current congressional staff members, as well as former and current members of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate. In all, dozens of members of Congress and Capitol Hill staff members were interviewed during the course of the project.

This report was drafted by Jason Forrester, visiting fellow in the International Security Program (ISP) at CSIS. Derek Mitchell, CSIS senior fellow and director for Asia in ISP, oversaw the project. Former CSIS senior fellow Joel Wit conducted the initial scoping study and contributed to an early draft of the report.

The author would also like to acknowledge the contributions of Carola McGiffert, CSIS vice president and chief of staff; Kazuyo Kato, ISP research associate; Lee Ridley, ISP project coordinator, and ISP interns Daniel Lim, Matthew Southerland, Will Buck, and Justin Learned.

CSIS is grateful for the on-going support of the Korea Foundation for underwriting this and other Korea-related studies at the Center. The Korea Foundation continues to serve as a critical lifeline for education and promotion of Korean affairs in Washington, D.C., and throughout the United States. This study could not have been conducted without the Foundation's support.

## Executive Summary

Members of Congress and their staff are generally optimistic regarding the future of the U.S.–South Korea military alliance and the U.S.–South Korea relationship in general. While positive expectations regarding the future of the relationship are broadly held, congressional understanding is narrow. Overall, Congress pays little attention to the U.S.–Republic of Korea (U.S.-ROK) relationship.<sup>1</sup> When it does, however, critical comments from vocal members of Congress and staff tend to garner considerable media coverage.

Issues in the U.S.-ROK relationship that have received the greatest attention in Congress in recent years include South Korea’s policies regarding North Korea’s nuclear weapons program and human rights abuses; the perceived growth of anti-Americanism in South Korea; and U.S.–South Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS) negotiations. Issues such as the realignment of U.S. forces on the Korean peninsula and missions that the United States and South Korea might undertake together beyond the Korean peninsula have received relatively little attention on Capitol Hill. South Korea’s inclusion in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP), while of great interest to Seoul, has not received a great deal of attention in Washington. Congressional resolutions concerning World War II “comfort women”/“sex slaves,” which the Korean-American community has taken the lead to advance, have made little progress through the U.S. legislative process in recent years. That said, this situation is changing primarily due to high-profile developments in Japan related to this issue.

As a whole, Korean-Americans play a limited role in influencing Congress on Korea-related issues, with the exception of encouraging Congress to pass legislation highlighting North Korean human rights abuses. In general, members of Congress with large Korean-American communities are not leading players on issues such as U.S. troop presence in South Korea, the threat posed by North Korea, or the KORUS. Members of Congress who have the most impact on these topics are the leading members of relevant committees, such as the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the Senate Finance Committee, and its House counterpart, the Ways and Means Committee.

A general challenge in understanding the state of U.S.–South Korea relations is that congressional attention to the relationship has become highly diffuse. The old adage “where you stand depends on where you sit” applies to perspectives toward Korea on Capitol Hill. Members of the Armed Services Committees are generally much more focused on U.S.-ROK defense matters; members on the Foreign Affairs Committees are more focused on regional relations and current diplomatic efforts; and members of the Finance/Ways and Means Committees are generally more focused on U.S.-ROK economic and trade affairs. In short, as with

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, “the U.S.-ROK relationship” includes the U.S.-ROK alliance, as well as other matters such as economic and cultural relations.

most other international issues, there is no central location within Congress—or the entire U.S. government, for that matter—that is responsible for coordinating the overall U.S.-ROK relationship.

In recent years, the House Foreign Affairs Committee has been the locus of the greatest pessimism regarding the U.S.–South Korea relationship. This pessimism, however, has also elicited strong statements of support for the relationship. Members of the Armed Services Committees have focused considerably on defense relations between the two countries. In recent years, these relations have been relatively smooth; consequently, there have been few critical comments from members of these committees regarding the future of the alliance. Finally, members of the Finance/Ways and Means Committees have been more focused on specific areas of concern or opportunity in U.S.–South Korea trade relations. Most prominently, senior senators from leading U.S. agricultural states have concentrated on impediments to U.S. beef exports to South Korea, while other members have devoted considerable attention to increasing the market share for U.S. automobiles in South Korea. To date, neither the concerns of the agricultural sector nor the automotive sector has been addressed to the satisfaction of these leading congressional voices, although the impact on the overall U.S.–South Korea relationship is unlikely to be severe.

# Congressional Attitudes on the Future of the U.S.– South Korea Relationship

*Jason W. Forrester*

## **Brief Historical Overview: 1953 to 2006**

Over the past decade, the U.S. Congress has become an increasingly active player on issues related to the Korean peninsula. For the 30 years after the end of the Korean War (1950–1953), a broad consensus existed around a U.S. policy that sought to prevent renewed aggression by North Korea.<sup>1</sup> This consensus manifested itself in continuing support for the 1953 U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty and the ongoing presence of U.S. troops on the peninsula. In the Cold War's early years, the United States focused on helping South Korea rebuild its economy and on establishing a resilient alliance through close political and military cooperation.

Until the Clinton administration, the most noteworthy issue in U.S.-ROK relations affecting Congress was the infamous “Koreagate” scandal of 1976. During a period when the United States was considering reductions in its military presence in Asia, particularly in South Korea, it was alleged that an agent of the South Korean government spent almost \$1 million a year to bribe congressmen and other officials to persuade the United States to remain in the country.<sup>2</sup> Despite widespread attention to the scandal, the incident passed without lasting damage to the U.S.-ROK alliance, although the experience surely remains an unhappy memory for South Korean officials and those on Capitol Hill.

During the 1980s, many members of Congress were involved in South Korean affairs through the promotion of human rights and democracy. Sanctions legislation against the Chun Doo-hwan martial law administration was introduced

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, the “Republic of Korea” (ROK) is used interchangeably with “South Korea”; the “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” (DPRK) is used interchangeably with “North Korea.”

<sup>2</sup> David Kang and Paul Chamberlin, “A History of U.S.-ROK Relations to 2002,” in *Strategy and Sentiment: South Korean Views of the United States and the U.S.-ROK Alliance*, ed. Derek J. Mitchell (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, June 2004), p. 16, <http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/0406mitchell.pdf>.

and debated, and pressure was placed on the Reagan administration to alter its traditional reluctance to urge authoritarian allies to reform, given lingering Cold War security concerns and attention to anti-Communism (although the Reagan administration ultimately played a key role in Chun's decision to cede power and his successor's decision to usher in an era of dramatic political reform).

The end of the Cold War and the North Korean nuclear weapons issue brought a new perspective to U.S. policy on the Korean peninsula and to congressional consensus in support of that policy. Signs of significant differences appeared during the first nuclear crisis with Pyongyang and after the 1994 U.S.–North Korea Agreed Framework. Republicans strongly criticized President Clinton's handling of the 1994 crisis, which reflected philosophical differences over not only how to achieve U.S. goals in North Korea but also how to deal with dictatorships abroad in general. Continued dissatisfaction on the Hill was reflected in a comprehensive report issued in 1999 by the Republican North Korea Advisory Group, which concluded that the overall threat posed by North Korea to the United States had grown during the Clinton years.<sup>3</sup>

The North Korea Advisory Group report did not include new policy recommendations, however. Indeed, even amidst these new and bitter debates, Congress continued to play a secondary role in U.S. policy toward the Korean peninsula. In the years after the 1994 Agreed Framework, Congress essentially approved administration funding requests for heavy fuel oil shipments to Pyongyang as part of the agreement (albeit sometimes rather late). At the same time, Congress attached increasingly onerous reporting requirements to its approvals. Congress did influence policy at the margins, for instance, by encouraging the Clinton administration to appoint a senior coordinator for North Korea in 1998 and more rigorously oversee the distribution of food aid to the North.

With the accession of a Republican to the White House in 2001, the advancement of a much harder line toward Pyongyang, and the shock of September 11, congressional debate on North Korea abated. By 2002, however, other issues came to the fore. Anti-American sentiment exhibited during the 2002 South Korean presidential election campaign, including public flag-burnings, attacks on U.S. citizens, including servicemen living in Seoul, and the perception in Washington that candidate Roh Moo-hyun exploited these conditions to emerge victorious, got congressional attention. Differences in perspective on regime change in North Korea and Roh's continuation of Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy" of unconditional engagement and aid to Pyongyang exacerbated doubts about the future of the alliance. As one expert observed, many on the Hill lumped South Korea with France as an unreliable ally.

Within the past decade, congressional attitudes have been influenced by the rise of lobbying groups that are seized with the issue of North Korea's consistently poor human rights record. Through the efforts of groups such as the

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<sup>3</sup> For the full text of the report, see North Korea Advisory Group, "Report to the Speaker, U.S. House of Representatives," November 1999, <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/dprk/nkag-report.htm>.

U.S. Committee for North Korean Human Rights and the North Korea Freedom Coalition, as well as support from key members of Congress, the *North Korea Freedom Act of 2003* was introduced. Initially, the bill attempted not only to block negotiations with Pyongyang until it demonstrated substantial progress on human rights, but also to pressure China and South Korea to change their North Korea policies. While eventually modified to focus almost exclusively on human rights and refugees, the bill was a clear reflection of congressional dissatisfaction with South Korea's "quiet diplomacy."

There have been other manifestations of potential problems for the U.S.–South Korean relationship on Capitol Hill. In early 2005, the entire Illinois delegation signed a letter to the DPRK's UN ambassador demanding an account of the case of the Reverend Kim Dong-shik, a pastor from Chicago reportedly detained in the North. The letter, however, was clearly intended to criticize Seoul's perceived indifference to North Korea's human rights abuses. The 2005 controversy over whether General Douglas MacArthur's statue in Incheon should be demolished, as demanded by some leftist South Koreans, also struck a negative chord. Five members of the House Committee on International Relations,<sup>4</sup> including its Asia Subcommittee chair, sent a letter to President Roh stating that Congress was "disturbed" by reports of General MacArthur being described as a "war criminal" and warning that the issue might adversely affect the security relationship.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the negative undercurrent of congressional views on Korea has yet to affect the 53-year-old U.S.-ROK military alliance. In 2005, some members expressed concern regarding President Roh's statement that South Korea might play the role of "balancer" in the region, a concept that seemed at odds with that of a U.S. ally. For the most part, Congress seems satisfied with the Bush administration's plan to adjust the U.S. force posture on the peninsula<sup>6</sup> and the results of the ongoing U.S.-ROK talks designed to implement that plan. That satisfaction hints at a widespread recognition on Capitol Hill that the global requirements of the U.S. military force posture are shifting with the war in Iraq and the longer-term war on terrorism.

A number of other positive factors in Congress reinforce the close alliance between the United States and the ROK. Some members of Congress are aware of and appreciate South Korea's contribution of 3,000 troops to the multinational forces in Iraq. Others argue that bilateral trade and the overall economic relationship have been generally cooperative and well managed. There is also a reservoir of admiration for what the ROK has achieved over the past several

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<sup>4</sup> The House International Relations Committee is now named the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

<sup>5</sup> Representative Henry J. Hyde et al., "Letter to President Roh Moo Hyun," September 15, 2005, reprinted as an ICAS Special Contribution, Institute for Corean-American Studies, Blue Bell, Pa., <http://www.icasinc.org/2005/20051/20051h2h.html>.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that some members are concerned that the commitment of a large number of U.S. forces to Iraq might hamper the United States' ability to, in the words of one staff member, "execute our war plans on the peninsula."

decades, particularly in building a democracy. South Korea boasts the largest contingent of foreign students studying in the United States (about 100,000, 13 percent of all active international students in the United States).<sup>7</sup> Finally, in spite of periodic differences, most members of Congress and their staff consider U.S.–South Korea cooperation in the Six-Party Talks to be positive.

Congressional views toward Korea, of course, are not uniform. They vary according to committee membership, generation, and issue area, among other factors. For example, the *North Korean Human Rights Act* (NKHRA) was modified according to the wishes of senior members such as then-Representative Jim Leach (R-Iowa), the chairman of the House International Relations Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, and Senator Joseph Biden (D-Del.), then the ranking minority member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. While some Republican members of the House, such as Henry Hyde, chairman of the House International Relations Committee from 2001 to 2006, were highly critical of South Korean policies, others such as Representative Leach remained more sympathetic to South Korea’s perspectives toward North Korea.

On the other hand, within some quarters of Congress over the past decade, confidence in U.S.–South Korea relations has declined. This may be the result of unavoidable trends such as the end of the Cold War, the democratization of South Korea<sup>8</sup> (which has led to more open criticism of the U.S.–South Korea relationship from some quarters in South Korea), a limited rapprochement between North and South, and U.S. attention being focused largely on Southwest Asia and other hot spots in the “global war on terrorism.” At present, it is unclear whether this is the beginning of an inexorable trend that will undermine congressional support for the alliance and threaten its continuation, or whether this trend will be successfully managed by the executive branch and others, working closely with Seoul, who are mindful of the benefits of a continued close alliance.

In the following sections, we will examine the overall perception of the U.S.–South Korea relationship on Capitol Hill, a number of specific issues that have garnered attention in the U.S. Congress, as well as handful of issues to which the South Korean government has attempted to bring greater attention in Congress.

## Specific Findings<sup>9</sup>

After reading four statements from a recent document prepared by the U.S.-Korea Visa Waiver Program Coalition,<sup>10</sup> one would assume that the U.S.-ROK relationship receives considerable attention on Capitol Hill:

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<sup>7</sup> U.S.-Korea Visa Waiver Program Coalition, “Summary of Key Facts on South Korea and the Visa Waiver Program,” [http://www.welcome-korea.org/factsheet\\_uskvwpc.pdf](http://www.welcome-korea.org/factsheet_uskvwpc.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> In the words of Derek J. Mitchell, “Americans, in professing support for democracy around the world, sometimes overlook the fact that new democracies can create as many complications as benefits for U.S. bilateral relationships.” Mitchell, *Strategy and Sentiment*, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> All interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis.

1. The United States is currently home to over 2,000,000 individuals of Korean heritage and ancestry.
2. There are 236 U.S. congressional districts where at least 1,000 Korean Americans reside.
3. On December 13, 2005, through resolutions passed unanimously in both the House and Senate, the United States Congress recognized the “influence of Korean Americans in all facets of American life” and designated every January 13 as Korean American Day.
4. Since pioneer Korean immigrants arrived in the United States on January 13, 1903, Korean Americans have greatly contributed to American society at large, a scope that reaches every level from government to business and community-based organizations.<sup>11</sup>

Given the importance of the U.S.-ROK relationship to U.S. national security, however, the topic garners scant attention in the U.S. Congress. In the words of a leading Senate Republican defense affairs staffer:

I have been working here for the past two years, but South Korea or the U.S.-ROK alliance has never come up, per se, in conversations. When it did, it was always in the context of North Korea... Perhaps I am pessimistic, but I think if you ask all the Hill staff members who the leader of South Korea is, maybe 20 staff members can answer correctly. To be fair, however, legislative assistants can get their job done without such knowledge.

According to a Republican interlocutor, whose comments echoed those of many others:

The majority of members of Congress feel they were elected on domestic issues, particularly economic and job issues, so they don't spend much time on foreign policy. In addition, there are serious time constraints that limit their ability to focus on issues like Korea. As a result, Congress is highly reactive.

The North Korean nuclear and missile threat garners the greatest attention of members and staff on Capitol Hill. Demonstrating the importance of North Korea policy over strictly U.S.-ROK alliance issues, one Democratic interlocutor stated: “for those members who do think about the Korean peninsula at all, alliance issues are trumped by North Korea.” Essentially all interlocutors reinforced this view. For this reason, the Six-Party Talks receive considerable attention from Hill staff and members.

### Limited but Positive Attention

While few members of Congress and their staff focus much attention on U.S.–South Korea relations, most members and staff have a positive view of the relationship. In particular, no staff or members contacted during the course of this

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<sup>10</sup> The U.S.-Korea Visa Waiver Program Coalition is supported by the government of South Korea as well as U.S. and South Korean businesses.

<sup>11</sup> U.S.-Korea Visa Waiver Program Coalition, “Summary of Key Facts on South Korea and the Visa Waiver Program.”

study took the stark position that the U.S.-ROK relationship has outlived its usefulness, as some policy analysts in Washington, D.C., argued a few years ago.<sup>12</sup> In general, when asked for their initial thoughts about South Korea, most interlocutors did not mention anti-Americanism. Nonetheless, as discussed below, for a small minority in Congress, concern about the perceived rise of anti-Americanism in South Korea was—and remains—a key area of concern.

Most interlocutors stated that South Korea is a good ally of the United States and that the U.S.–South Korea alliance is very important in promoting U.S. interests in Northeast Asia. The most common reasons for the alliance listed were: (1) maintaining a U.S. presence in Northeast Asia; (2) deterring North Korea; and (3) hedging against a rising China.

Reflecting the serious matters associated with U.S.–South Korea policy, one Democratic staff member stated:

Overall, if you asked about Korea and relationships there [Korea], members think about the prospect of going back to fight in the area and the commitment to defend the ROK. Members here view the relationship through the prism of “Are we going to have to fight there again, and if so, how much of the burden will be upon us?”

As a general matter, limited congressional attention is both a blessing and a curse to the U.S.–South Korea relationship. It is a blessing in the sense that, when Congress focuses on an issue, it is usually because there is a problem or some members desire to place inordinate attention on a single element of a relationship, which is sometimes to the detriment of a security partnership. On the other hand, limited congressional attention is a curse because there are not sufficient staunch supporters of the alliance to help handle the inevitable difficulties that will arise in a relationship as complicated as that between the United States and South Korea.

### The Changing Relationship

All interlocutors noted that the U.S.–South Korea relationship is changing. As a Republican Senate staffer stated: “The U.S.–South Korea relationship is going through a period of intense transition. We are friends, but not best friends. We have strong differences on North Korea, but it is not the end of the relationship.”

All those interviewed stated that they believed that if the U.S.-ROK alliance ended it would be to the detriment of U.S. national security interests. That said, most interviewed stated that U.S.–South Korean relations are in a state of flux given the divergence in how to handle the challenge posed by North Korea, new thinking within the younger generation in South Korea regarding the U.S.-ROK relationship, and changes in U.S. global defense strategy, which has led to a drawdown in U.S. forces on the peninsula.

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<sup>12</sup> Ted Galen Carpenter and Doug Bandow, *The Korean Conundrum: America’s Troubled Relations with North and South Korea* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

Interlocutors noted that neither the United States nor South Korea can be blamed solely for the problems in the relationship. According to a Republican staffer when asked about the future of the alliance:

I think U.S. interests will ultimately keep the alliance together. There are unnecessary frictions in the relationship, but I think both sides are at fault. The United States needs to use more of a “Bill Clinton–type approach” and try to understand South Korea rather than to say they are wrong. South Korea, for its part, should do more outreach and have an agenda for it.

In the words of leading Democratic staffer: “As long as South Koreans think we are taking them seriously rather than dictating, we can work on various issues.”

### Anti-Americanism in the ROK

For a small, but often vocal, subset of members of Congress and their staff, periodic demonstrations of anti-Americanism in South Korea garner considerable attention. In the words of one Capitol Hill source, “Congress is a political institution, so anti-Americanism resonates strongly.” In the 109th Congress (2005–2006), congressional concern regarding anti-Americanism in South Korea was most clearly expressed by former representative Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), the former chairman of the House International Relations Committee. Of particular note was Representative Hyde’s concern over the fate of the General Douglas MacArthur statue in Incheon. While this issue drew considerable attention in the Korean press, only five members of the U.S. House of Representatives,<sup>13</sup> out of a possible 435, signed a letter to President Roh regarding the statue. No members of the Senate signed the letter.

Most interlocutors said that they believed anti-Americanism in South Korea, while regrettable, is not a “deal breaker.” Most see anti-Americanism as an inevitable problem in a relationship that has endured for over a half century. Nonetheless, one staff member noted that a relative whose son is posted to South Korea with the U.S. military had asked why her son should stay in a country where he was not welcome. Another staff member argued that the South Korean government contributed to anti-Americanism by attempting to minimize the North Korean threat: “South Korea is always in denial about North Korea’s threat. When South Korea makes a statement that America—rather than North Korea—is the problem, that comes across badly.”

When a Democratic Senate staffer who handles trade issues was informed that some members of Congress were concerned by the rise in anti-Americanism in South Korea, the staffer stated that he had not heard about this and that having heard about it he was somewhat less inclined to favor a free trade agreement between the United States and South Korea. This staff member believed that most, if not all, South Koreans were comfortable with the U.S. presence in South Korea.

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<sup>13</sup> Moreover, of the five House members who signed the letter, one was a nonvoting member.

Congressional interlocutors highlighted a number of ways that anti-Americanism might be addressed. In the words of one individual:

The United States needs to undertake more public outreach in Korea and send more frequent high-level official delegations to Korea. Ultimately, however, popular sentiment will be shaped by how the North Korea situation is resolved. [At present], the United States is seen as a major barrier to peace and stability on the peninsula; [within many quarters in South Korea] the U.S., not Kim Jong-il, is blamed for tensions with North Korea.

### Generational Change versus Generational Continuity

The U.S.–South Korea relationship continues to benefit from the bonds forged during the Korean War. Many of the older members in Congress still believe, in the words of one Democratic staff member, that the “alliance [is] built on shared values, friendship, and blood.” For many of these members, their formative years were spent focused to some degree on the tense standoff between the North and South and the ongoing belief that the United States and South Korea have many shared interests. Also, for some members of the Armed Services Committees, their views of South Korea are shaped by the generally constructive military-to-military relations between the two countries.

A number of younger members of Congress have different perspectives. In the words of one Democratic Hill interlocutor: “the group of younger, ‘blue-dog’ [conservative], trade-oriented Democrats, see the relationship as more a way to confront the DPRK nuclear threat than anything else and also see the ROK as an economic engine that they don’t want to see damaged.”

When asked about the evolution of U.S.-ROK relations over recent decades, very few interlocutors had informed views. As a general matter, most stated that with the passing of the older generations in the United States and South Korea the relationship will go through a period of readjustment and that a deeper dialogue is required between the United States and South Korea if the alliance is to be maintained, if not strengthened.

### Skepticism Regarding “Sunshine”

On a bipartisan basis, those interviewed were very skeptical of South Korean policy toward North Korea, including the Sunshine Policy and subsequent ROK efforts to engage North Korea. Most interlocutors believed that South Korea’s policies toward North Korea were too generous, naïve, and/or dangerous. That said, Democratic interlocutors were generally more favorably disposed to an engagement-oriented approach to North Korea—but not an approach as forward leaning as ROK president Roh Moo-hyun has advocated. As a general matter, interlocutors believed that these differences in approach toward North Korea are not insurmountable. In the words of one Republican staff member: “I don’t know how to alleviate this divergence of views on North Korea except to talk about it. The more we talk the better.”

## The Korean-American Community

Most interlocutors stated that the Korean-American community has very little effect on U.S.-ROK relations, with the exception of a concerted lobbying effort around the World War II “comfort women”/“sex slave” issue. Some elements of the Korean-American community had become more active in promoting the *North Korean Human Rights Act*, according to interlocutors, but these groups were generally seen as representing only a small portion of the Korean-American community. That said, those interviewed stated that though these groups were small, they had convinced a number of members that their views were consistent with those of most in the Korean-American community.

## Korea in Overall U.S. Defense Strategy

Interlocutors repeatedly affirmed that U.S. defense posture and activity in South Korea must fit into the global U.S. defense strategy. Given the large U.S. military commitment to Iraq, according to one Democratic staff member, “The question often asked is how much strategic risk are we taking relative to Iraq and if we were forced to take action in the ROK, what would the commitment be and how would we manage it?” Similarly, interlocutors noted that a topic that will merit attention in 2007 and beyond will be: how progress in implementation of the September 2005 and February 2007 Six-Party Talks agreements with North Korea might affect thinking in Congress concerning U.S. forces stationed in South Korea, given competing defense needs. If the denuclearization deal with North Korea shows signs of succeeding, some suggested this might result in less concern on the Hill that defense commitments in Korea could result in difficult choices for the U.S. military elsewhere.

## Japan

When asked to compare the U.S.–South Korea and U.S.-Japan alliances, all interlocutors expressed stronger positive feelings toward the U.S.-Japan alliance than for the U.S.-ROK alliance. In words of one Republican staff member:

Japan receives 10 times more attention than does South Korea in part because South Korea is seen as a “problem child.” Japan is a solid ally, and therefore the United States can think creatively about what to do together with Japan... the Japanese want to know how they can help the United States as an ally—this is not an approach taken by South Korea.

While not disputing that the U.S.-Japan relationship has fewer points of tension than the U.S.–South Korea relationship, one Democratic House staff member noted:

Members are aware of the interlocking history [of South Korea and Japan] but see them as separate issues. With regard to base realignment, for example, the two alliances came up together, but there is no direct sense of complete linkage. There has been discussion of regional scenarios like Taiwan, but there has been no talk involving overall regional security. We don’t tend to

think that way. It tends to be up to the executive branch to make those decisions.

On a bipartisan basis interlocutors also noted that North Korea's actions will influence Japan's activities in the region. One Republican staff member noted: "If North Korea continues down this confrontational path, Japan is likely to step up its militarization, which will unnerve its neighbors and present a different challenge for the United States and put considerable stress on the U.S.-ROK alliance."

In sum, given their geographical proximity and close ties to the United States, South Korea and Japan are often implicitly, if not explicitly, compared by members of Congress and their staff. The perception that the United States and Japan have a consonant worldview, especially as compared to South Korea, will continue to be a challenge for the ROK.

### China's Rise

South Korea has also suffered on Capitol Hill from being in a region of the world where more and more attention is being focused on the rise of China. According to a leading Democratic House staff member, when a congressional delegation traveled to East Asia in 2004, members focused primarily on China, but they also stopped in South Korea to examine the U.S. force posture there. In the words of the staff member: "If you had asked most members on that trip, they were going because of China. Most went with low expectations of the ROK and came back very impressed with ROK capabilities; they did not have a good understanding prior to the trip."

When asked how China's rise affects their thinking about U.S.-ROK relations, most interlocutors stated that China's rise makes it more important that the United States work to strengthen its alliance with South Korea. Most interlocutors were concerned that China's military rise coupled with a weakening of the U.S.-ROK relationship could create a more precarious security situation for the United States in Northeast Asia. A number of interlocutors also expressed concerns regarding South Korea's efforts to strengthen ties with China. In particular, some interlocutors worried that such cooperation might increase the likelihood that China would use ties with South Korea as a means to gather intelligence on the United States.

### Limited Understanding of Internal ROK Politics

Very few interlocutors had informed views regarding the current debates and personalities in South Korean politics. Few interlocutors expected that U.S.-ROK relations would dramatically improve after the December 2007 ROK presidential election. That said, some interlocutors did express concerns regarding President Roh's leadership style, as well as his commitment to the U.S.-ROK relationship, and expressed the hope that a fresh start would create a better environment for strengthening the alliance in coming years.

## Limited Credit for Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan

As a general matter, those on Capitol Hill have not commented much publicly about South Korea's troop contribution to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The matter is periodically mentioned in opening statements in congressional hearings that focus on Korean matters, but in general, members of Congress and their staff have paid little attention to these ROK contributions. Those who were suspicious of President Roh believed that he pushed for troops to be contributed to Iraq in an attempt to gain leverage with the United States to be more flexible in its North Korea policy and to compensate for earlier statements that may have angered Washington.

Nonetheless, members of Congress who focus on the heavy burden placed on U.S. forces in Iraq gave considerable credit to South Korea for its contribution, while many Democratic staff members seemed to give the ROK little credit since they saw the war in Iraq as an unwise move by the Bush administration.

Regarding the South Korean contribution to the U.S.-led effort in Afghanistan, very few members of Congress or their staff were aware of this contribution.

## U.S.-ROK Defense Issues

Most interlocutors affirmed that the U.S. military presence in South Korea should be maintained. A number of congressional staff members expressed concerns that the Rumsfeld-led Pentagon<sup>14</sup> had cut U.S. forces in South Korea without sufficient consultation with ROK officials. In the words of one Democratic source: "The Congress has basically left military/realignment issues up to the Pentagon, and it is not a big focus of discussion on the Hill. Congress would have oversight over any realignment arrangement but would not legislatively enshrine it."

In the wake of the street demonstrations against the U.S. presence in 2002 and 2003, some members such as Representative Henry Hyde argued that if U.S. forces were not wanted in South Korea then they should leave. Nonetheless, a number of other congressional interlocutors, while agreeing with the basic notion that U.S. forces will, and can, only remain in South Korea at the request of the ROK government, strongly disagreed with the undertone of Representative Hyde's comment, which suggested that the United States under certain conditions would not be alarmed about the prospect of disengaging militarily from the peninsula. According to one Democratic interlocutor reacting to Hyde's statement:

That is rhetoric, not policy. It is in our interest to have troops on the Korean peninsula, not as favor to the Koreans. We must view the relationship in this light. If the United States was off the Korean peninsula, we'd have even worse military options than we do today vis-à-vis North Korea.

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<sup>14</sup> That is, Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. secretary of defense from January 2001 through December 2006.

When asked about the U.S. force level in South Korea, most interlocutors stated that they believed there were sufficient U.S. forces in South Korea to deter North Korea. Ongoing relocation of U.S. forces in South Korea generally receives little attention in Congress; despite the relocation of U.S. troops from Yongsan Garrison being behind schedule, no congressional interlocutors expressed concerns regarding the delay. Concerning the transfer of wartime operational control to South Korean forces, most people interviewed stated that the Pentagon had done a very poor job of keeping Capitol Hill informed of this process.<sup>15</sup> A number of interlocutors expressed concerns that the transfer of wartime operational control (opcon) to South Korea could be misinterpreted by Pyongyang as a sign of a diminished U.S. commitment to the defense of South Korea. When one staff member was asked if transferring wartime opcon to South Korea might send the wrong signal to North Korea, s/he emphatically answered: “Yes. It’s all about perceptions.” Democratic staff members stated that they expected that, with the Democratic takeover of both chambers of Congress, the Pentagon would be pressed to be more inclusive and informative on such matters in the 110th Congress (2007–2008).

Despite the ongoing efforts of the Bush administration to convince South Korea to bear a larger portion of the costs of basing U.S. forces in South Korea, very few interlocutors said they considered the current level of burden sharing between U.S. and ROK forces inequitable. As one staffer who works for a centrist Democrat noted: “Nobody cares. We are so in debt that there is no thought of recapitalization; the only thought is that we will need to extricate ourselves from Iraq in the next year or two. Korea is such a minor blip that it doesn’t attract much attention.” That said, given the often-reactive nature of congressional involvement in U.S.–South Korea defense matters, if an issue arose highlighting the fact that the United States still bears more than 50 percent of the costs of basing U.S. troops in South Korea, this could lead to renewed calls from Congress to accelerate movement toward 50/50 burden sharing between the two countries.

Overall, the realignment of U.S. troops on the Korean peninsula and the transfer of wartime operational control to South Korea have received very little attention on Capitol Hill in recent years. These issues are primarily discussed in closed-door meetings between one or two members of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees and officials such as General Burwell Bell, commander UN Command/Combined Forces Command/U.S. Forces Korea. Interlocutors stated that this was due principally to the great attention devoted to the war in Iraq.

### ROK Foreign Direct Investment in the United States

In recent years, a number of leading ROK businesses have made—or announced plans to make—sizeable investments in the United States. According to the U.S.-Korea Visa Waiver Program Coalition, “South Korea...has invested more than

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<sup>15</sup> A small number of staff members stated that they were pleased with the level of consultation by the commander of the U.S. Forces Korea, though they were less pleased with the level of consultation by high-ranking civilians in the Pentagon.

\$18.5 billion in foreign direct investment in the U.S. through the end of 2005.”<sup>16</sup>  
The coalition has also highlighted that:

In April 2006, Samsung announced the construction of a second, massive chip factory in Austin, Texas, that will cost \$3.5 to \$4 billion (the single largest investment ever by a foreign company) and is expected to create 900 additional new jobs in the region. In Montgomery, Alabama, Hyundai Motor Company, South Korea’s largest automotive manufacturer, built a \$1.1 billion plant in 2002 that now employs 2,000 people and also created 5,500 additional new jobs for the 72 suppliers that support the plant. Two other Hyundai Motors Group companies have also decided to establish plants in the U.S. including railcar manufacturer Rotem that will set up its new factory at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, creating 200 jobs, and Kia Motors recently announced the construction of a \$1.2 billion assembly plant in West Point, Georgia, bringing about 5,500 jobs to the state.<sup>17</sup>

As a general matter, however, interlocutors stated that ROK foreign direct investment (FDI) in the United States played a small role in thinking on Capitol Hill regarding U.S.-ROK relations. While interlocutors welcomed greater ROK FDI, no interlocutor stated that ROK FDI greatly affected U.S.-ROK ties.

### Travel to ROK

Overall, only about 30 percent of those interviewed had traveled to South Korea on official congressional business. Those who traveled generally had positive impressions. At present, the U.S.-ROK inter-parliamentary exchange receives very little attention on Capitol Hill, with the exception of the small number of offices that take the lead in organizing the exchange. Most interlocutors viewed the exchange as quite superficial. In addition, House Democratic staff members complained that in the years before the November 2006 elections, Republicans alone had run the inter-parliamentary exchange. These staff members predicted that, with the transfer of power in Congress, it would take a while for the exchange to be restarted. According to one staff member: “There is no formal exchange; it is not regularized.”

A few congressional trips to South Korea received considerable scrutiny in recent years because of the involvement of Jack Abramoff, the now-imprisoned Washington lobbyist. According to two front-page reports in the *Washington Post*, the Korea-U.S. Exchange Council—which was financed by a private South Korean business conglomerate, the Hanwha Group, chaired by Seung Youn Kim—sponsored illegal congressional trips to South Korea by virtue of its being a “registered foreign agent.”

The trips included members such as former majority leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas), Representatives John Carter (R-Texas), Ander Crenshaw (R-Fla.), John T.

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<sup>16</sup> U.S.-Korea Visa Waiver Program Coalition, “Summary of Key Facts on South Korea and the Visa Waiver Program.”

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Doolittle (R-Calif.),<sup>18</sup> Mike Honda (D-Calif.), Jim McDermott (D-Wash.), Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), Delegate Eni Faleomavaega (D-American Samoa), and a staff member to current Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.). According to the *Post*, “some Congress members and aides who went on the trips said they had not known” that the group was a registered foreign agent.<sup>19</sup> According to the *Post*, lobbyists for the Hanwha Group “directed a steady stream of U.S. lawmakers and staff members of both parties to Seoul, where Kim squired them to meetings with top government officials. [Seung Youn] Kim traveled several times to Washington, where, according to the reports to the Justice Department, he met with prominent politicians and lawmakers.”<sup>20</sup> The likelihood for the Korea-U.S. Exchange Council to influence U.S.-Korea policy declined dramatically in 2006 when the Alexander Strategy Group shut down the Korea nonprofit.

It is unclear what effect, if any, this brush with trouble will have on the future of congressional travel to South Korea. It would be unfortunate, however, if a sponsor’s tainted associations affected the prospect of greater congressional interaction with counterparts in Seoul, which will remain an important element of the future relationship.

## Case Studies

To better understand the contours of congressional perspectives on South Korea and U.S.–South Korean relations, four case studies were examined.

### North Korea: Human Rights and Nuclear Weapons

The level and character of attention paid to the Korean peninsula by the U.S. Congress has changed over time. The most obvious example of this change can be seen in attitudes in Congress regarding North Korea.

The different approach toward North Korea of the United States and South Korea became most evident during the 1990s when the Republican-led House repeatedly challenged the Clinton administration’s approach to dealing with the situation—in particular the Agreed Framework. This was most clearly manifested in the Congress’s repeated reluctance to fully fund the provision of heavy fuel oil through the Korean Economic Development Organization (KEDO).

Congress’s recent skepticism regarding South Korea’s engagement of North Korea was most prominently expressed by members such as Representatives Henry Hyde (R-Ill.) and Tom Lantos (D-Calif.). Representative Hyde in particular was publicly critical of the ROK’s 2004 Ministry of National Defense White

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<sup>18</sup> According to the *Washington Post*, “Doolittle’s junket [which also included a stop in Malaysia]...cost \$29,400...[and] was among the most expensive privately sponsored trips by members of Congress in recent years.”

<sup>19</sup> James V. Grimaldi and Susan Schmidt, “Foreign Lobbies Took the Guise of Nonprofits,” *Washington Post*, November 3, 2006; and Mike Allen and R. Jeffrey Smith, “S. Korean Group Sponsored DeLay Trip; Visits May Have Broken House Rules,” *Washington Post*, March 10, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Grimaldi and Schmidt, “Foreign Lobbies Took the Guise of Nonprofits.”

Paper, which omitted mention of the DPRK as the ROK's "main enemy." In a March 10, 2005, House International Relations Committee hearing, he stated:

[The] mixed signals on the security question, coming from Seoul, only compound the challenge we face with North Korea. The Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense White Paper for 2004 contained an apparent contradiction which causes some confusion. On the one hand, it deleted the designation of Pyongyang as "the main enemy," although Pyongyang's continued hostility has been a major rationale for the U.S.-ROK alliance. Second, the White Paper stated that, in the event of armed conflict in Korea, the U.S. would dispatch 690,000 troops—over four times the 150,000 U.S. forces now serving in Iraq. This seems to reflect great expectations at a time when U.S. resources are already elsewhere committed. Congress would certainly have a major role in examining the implications of such a massive deployment. It also raises a very germane issue: if you need our help, please tell us clearly who your enemy is.<sup>21</sup>

Hyde, Lantos, and other members of Congress began to criticize the ROK's North Korea policy by focusing on North Korea's glaring human rights abuses. In 2004, Congress passed the *North Korean Human Rights Act*. Congressional attention to this issue stood in direct—and conscious—contrast with the apparent reluctance of South Korea to challenge the North on this front.

In the three years since the NKHRA became law, the Congress, especially the House International Relations Committee and senators such as Sam Brownback (R-Kans.), has closely monitored the Bush administration's implementation of the act. Multiple hearings, most of which have involved Jay Lefkowitz, U.S. special envoy on human rights in North Korea (a position created under the act), have been held to discuss the issue.

In addition, in early 2006, eight representatives and two senators sent a letter to Secretary of State Rice complaining that the State Department had not done enough to ensure full implementation of the act.<sup>22</sup> Democratic control of both the House and the Senate will probably not change congressional attention on the issue: among the eight House members to sign the letter was Representative Lantos, the new chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. In addition, one of the two senators to sign the letter was Evan Bayh (D-Ind.), who will continue to be a leading voice in the Senate.

Overall, many in Congress are skeptical of an engagement-oriented approach for dealing with the North Korean nuclear threat. Even those in Congress who would generally support diplomatic approaches over military ones have criticized payments or other inducements to North Korea without explicit, reciprocal action

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<sup>21</sup> "Opening Remarks of Chairman Henry J. Hyde," Full Committee Hearing on "The Korean peninsula: Six Party Talks and the Nuclear Issue," March 10, 2005, U.S. House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, accessed at: <http://www.internationalrelations.house.gov/archives/109/hyde031005.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> "Letter to Secretary Rice on NKHRA funding and implementation (2/21/06)," Congressional Hearings and Statements: The North Korean Human Rights Act—Documents and Background," <http://www.internationalrelations.house.gov/nkhra.htm>.

from Pyongyang. With Democratic control of the Congress, it is expected that there will be a greater push for the United States to take a more active role in the Six-Party Talks. That said, the approach of the Democratic-led Congress to North Korea will have more in common with that of the Republican-led Congress than with the South Korean approach to North Korea.

As a general matter, those interviewed were not as concerned about the possibility of a dramatic collapse of the North Korean regime as they were about the possibility of North Korean proliferation of nuclear and missile technology. There was also bipartisan agreement that South Korea should join the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). Interlocutors were generally puzzled by the South Korean government's unwillingness to participate fully in the PSI, and they were not reassured by South Korean statements that the ROK is already vigilantly ensuring that North Korea does not proliferate.

### ROK Inclusion in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP)

Including South Korea in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP)—which currently grants 27 countries the right to visa-free travel in the United States for up to 90 days—is one of the most important issues on South Korea's lobbying agenda. Despite a concerted effort to bring greater attention to this issue on Capitol Hill, including the creation of a “U.S.-Korea Visa Waiver Program Coalition,” many staff and members are still not well informed on the issue. Ironically, the South Korean government's steadfast efforts to add the ROK to the VWP have, in the estimation of some staff, had a negative effect on U.S.-ROK relations. According to one Republican interlocutor: “I think when you meet a foreign country's representative, and visa waiver is one of the top agenda items, there is a problem.”

For those favoring adding ROK to the VWP, President Bush's announcement in November 2006 that his administration would “work with our Congress and our international partners to modify our visa waiver program” was an encouraging development.<sup>23</sup> In early 2007, the possibility of the ROK being added to the VWP was given a considerable boost when the Senate passed the *Improving America's Security by Implementing Unfinished Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007*, which recommended that “visa-free travel privileges” be extended “to nationals of foreign countries that are allies in the war on terrorism....”

The largest impediment to South Korean membership in the VWP has been the requirement that member countries not exceed a 3 percent visa refusal rate. At present, it appears likely that the U.S. government will increase this threshold to about 10 percent, a level that South Korea should have no difficulty meeting.

The South Korea government has urged repeatedly that it should be added to the VWP because of the close and special relationship the two countries have shared for decades and the continued robust people-to-people ties between the

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<sup>23</sup> Office of the White House Press Secretary, “President Bush Participates in Joint Press Availability with President Ilves of Estonia,” November 28, 2006, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/11/20061128-4.html>.

two nations. The ROK government also points to Japan's achievement of a visa waiver as a puzzling contrast.

### World War II "Comfort Women" / "Sex Slave" Issue

A repeated source of disappointment for the South Korean government and the Korean-American community is Congress's unwillingness to officially condemn the Japanese government for forcing women to become "comfort women"/"sex slaves"<sup>24</sup> during World War II. According to the Congressional Research Service, "most estimates of the number of these 'comfort women' range from 50,000 to 200,000. A sizeable plurality or a majority of them were Korean."<sup>25</sup>

Congress first began taking up the issue in the mid-1990s. The failure of successive congressional resolutions on the matter has reinforced the notion in the minds of many South Koreans that the United States values its relationship with Japan more than its relationship with South Korea.

The defeat of the resolution in the 109th Congress (2005–2006) was an especially painful blow to the Korean-American community, which had engaged in four years of concerted lobbying, letter writing, and other means of persuasion to urge passage of measures that would have urged the Japanese government to make a clearer apology. This was the largest, most well-coordinated lobbying effort mounted to date by the Korean-American community. Some observers interpreted the failure of the resolution as a sign of the relative weakness of the Korean-American community. On the other hand, some observers pointed out the Korean-American community and the Korean government faced staunch opposition from the Japanese government, as well as from strong congressional supporters of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

The most recent attempt to encourage the Japanese government to apologize was initiated in the first days of the 110th Congress. On January 31, 2007, Representative Mike Honda (D-Calif.) introduced House Resolution (H. Res.) 121, which reads in part:

[T]he sense of the House of Representatives that the Government of Japan should formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner for its Imperial Armed Force's coercion of young women into sexual slavery, known to the world as "comfort women," during its colonial and wartime occupation of Asia and the Pacific Islands from the 1930s through the duration of World War II.

While the resolution cites past efforts by the Japanese government to acknowledge and apologize for wartime atrocities—such as a 1993 statement by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono and the establishment in 1995 of the private Asian Women's Fund—it calls on the Japanese government to take four additional steps to ensure that there is no future ambiguity regarding the Japanese

<sup>24</sup> In the Korean press, the phrase "sex slaves" is most often used, while in the Japanese and U.S. press "comfort women" is the more common phrase.

<sup>25</sup> Larry Niksch, "Japanese Military's 'Comfort Women,'" Congressional Research Service Memorandum, April 10, 2006.

government’s position on this matter. Specifically, H. Res. 121 states that the government of Japan:

1. should formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility in a clear and unequivocal manner for its Imperial Armed Force’s coercion of young women into sexual slavery, known to the world as “comfort women,” during its colonial and wartime occupation of Asia and the Pacific Islands from the 1930s through the duration of World War II;
2. should have this official apology given as a public statement presented by the Prime Minister of Japan in his official capacity;
3. should clearly and publicly refute any claims that the sexual enslavement and trafficking of the “comfort women” for the Japanese Imperial Armed Forces never occurred; and
4. should educate current and future generations about this horrible crime while following the recommendations of the international community with respect to the “comfort women.”

Representatives Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.) and Steve Chabot (R-Ohio) have argued against the resolution, saying that Japan has repeatedly apologized for the mistakes of the past. Two weeks after a congressional hearing in February 2007, Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe surprised many in South Korea and the United States when he asserted that there was no evidence of coercion by Japan’s imperial forces in using Asian women as “comfort women”/“sex slaves.” Abe stated, “The fact is, there is no evidence to prove there was coercion. We have to take it from there.”<sup>26</sup> Subsequent statements have further complicated the picture about the Abe government’s stance on the issue.

Before this latest episode, most congressional interlocutors admitted that staff and members did not want to harm the U.S.-Japan relationship by backing measures that the Japanese government staunchly opposes. Nonetheless, the controversy and public attention generated by Prime Minister Abe’s recent comments have increased the likelihood that more women’s rights and human rights groups will join Korean-American organizations to rally strongly behind the “comfort women”/“sex slaves” resolution. With the Democrats now in control of the House of Representatives, H. Res. 121 may have a better chance of passage than before. In previous Congresses, both Nancy Pelosi and Tom Lantos have cosponsored “comfort women”/“sex slave resolutions.” That said, as of this writing, neither Pelosi nor Lantos are cosponsors of H. Res. 121. Another considerable impediment to a statement of congressional disapproval is that, as of March 2007, there was no companion piece of legislation in the Senate.

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<sup>26</sup> “Abe: ‘Comfort Women’ Not Coerced,” *China Daily*, March 2, 2007.

## U.S.-ROK Free Trade Agreement (KORUS)<sup>27</sup>

On April 2, 2007, the United States and South Korea completed negotiations on a U.S.-ROK free trade agreement (KORUS). The agreement, if implemented, would be the second-largest U.S. free trade agreement, after the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The possibility of a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) was a topic of interest for a number of interlocutors. For most security experts on Capitol Hill, the KORUS was viewed positively but was not seen as something that would markedly improve U.S.–South Korea relations. As one Democratic staff member noted: “If political relations are in bad shape, then it is difficult to see the FTA substituting for the alliance relationship [as a mechanism to maintain good relations].”

For those interested primarily in U.S.-ROK economic relations, the prospect of a KORUS presented both concern and hope. On February 2, 2006, the *Washington Trade Daily* summed it up this way:

The United States has been encouraged by recent moves on Korea’s part over the past six to eight months to ease the way toward negotiations—such as relaxed rules on auto emissions which have barred imports of larger US automobiles, partially opening the nation’s market to US beef and increasing film screen quotas for foreign movie makers. Progress also has been made on pharmaceutical pricing in the country and improvements in intellectual property rights enforcement.

On the day KORUS negotiations commenced (June 5, 2006), future speaker Nancy Pelosi, future majority leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), and the two top House Democrats on trade issues, Representatives Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) and Sander Levin (D-Mich.), released a statement entitled “U.S.-Korea FTA ‘Critical Test’ For Bush Administration—Failure to stand up for American manufacturers, farmers and service providers in critical trade pact would be devastating.”<sup>28</sup> The statement was highly critical of South Korea, particularly its policies affecting the automotive sector:

This FTA represents a crucial test for the Bush Administration’s trade policy. In the manufacturing sector, despite two past trade agreements with South Korea, its automotive market remains closed for business to American manufacturers. Now is the time for South Korea to tear down its walls once and for all. This Administration should not accept any more of South Korea’s false promises. If this Administration fails to provide measurable and meaningful market access for the U.S. automotive sector, it cannot allow

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<sup>27</sup> Interviews for this report were completed before successful negotiations on the KORUS were completed on March 31, 2007. Implementation of the agreement, including ratification by the U.S. and ROK legislatures, remained under discussion at the time of the final drafting of the report.

<sup>28</sup> News Release from Representative Charles B. Rangel, Ranking Democrat, Committee on Ways and Means, “U.S.-Korea FTA ‘Critical Test’ For Bush Administration,” June 5, 2006, [http://www.house.gov/list/press/wm31\\_democrats/060605\\_us\\_korea\\_fta\\_critical\\_test\\_for\\_bush\\_administration.html](http://www.house.gov/list/press/wm31_democrats/060605_us_korea_fta_critical_test_for_bush_administration.html).

Korean autos additional access to the U.S. auto market. It is imperative that the Bush Administration stand up for this important sector by ensuring that a free trade agreement with South Korea results in a truly open market and more opportunities for U.S. automotive manufacturers to compete.<sup>29</sup>

With the Democratic takeover of Congress, Sander Levin, chairman of the Subcommittee on Trade in the House Ways and Means Committee, is one of the most important players on Capitol Hill in the area of U.S. trade policy. Levin comes from Michigan, the heart of the U.S. auto industry. Given congressional concerns regarding ROK automotive policy, his ascension reduces the likelihood of a KORUS that would affect the U.S. automobile industry

U.S. beef exports to South Korea have also been a prominent area of concern for many senators from Midwestern states, most importantly the chairman and ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, Senator Max Baucus (D-Mont,) and Senator Charles Grassley (R-Iowa). Given the power of the U.S. agriculture lobby, beef exports are a subject that members of Congress focus on extremely closely. Numerous times during the KORUS negotiations, senators held meetings with the South Korean ambassador and released letters and statements making clear that if the issue of U.S. beef exports to South Korea was not handled to their satisfaction they would not vote in favor of the KORUS. In addition, many members of Congress commented that they were becoming impatient about repeated reassurances from South Korean interlocutors that the beef issue was close to being resolved by scientific inspections.

Divergent U.S. and South Korean approaches to North Korea were also manifested in the KORUS negotiations. South Korean trade negotiators wanted goods from the Kaesŏng Industrial Park in North Korea to be included in the KORUS. These officials noted that such goods had been included in the ROK-Singapore free trade agreement. Congressional figures repeatedly warned that no deal could pass Congress that included goods from Kaesŏng, which given the lack of adequate accountability of funds going into the area was seen as amounting to financial aid to North Korea during a period when the United States was seeking to maintain leverage on Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons program.

Initial public comments from leading members of Congress about the KORUS suggest that the upcoming congressional debate over the agreement will be robust and difficult (as it likely will be in South Korea as well). While the intent will not be to complicate the overall U.S.–South Korea relationship, and motivations will be driven mainly by domestic economic (and political) factors rather than any antipathy toward South Korea itself, the nature of the debate will probably not be pleasant to many South Koreans. How this will play in South Korea's own debate, and in South Korea's upcoming political season, may in turn feed the congressional discussion, a potentially unhappy action-reaction cycle about which both sides will need to be vigilant.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

## The Future

While most on Capitol Hill are optimistic regarding the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance, the words of one highly placed Democratic staff member bear noting. When asked to envision a scenario under which the U.S.-ROK alliance would end, the source replied:

The alliance could end. For example, if in 10 years the South Korean government still had the same view and policy toward North Korea, continuing to increase its aid to North Korea—in other words, “sunshine on steroids”—this could fray the relationship beyond repair.

### Changes with Democratic Takeover of Congress

With the Democratic takeover of both the Senate and House, some changes can be expected in congressional attitudes regarding the U.S.-ROK relationship. In some ways, the relationship may run smoother. For instance, former speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), well known for his affection for Japan, was less likely to entertain South Korean government and Korean-American concerns regarding Japan’s need to formally apologize on the “comfort women”/“sex slaves” issue. Speaker Pelosi is well known as an outspoken promoter of human rights and may not be as attentive to the concerns of the Japanese government as was Speaker Hastert.

Regarding the change in leadership in the Senate, neither former majority leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) nor Harry Reid (D-Nev.), his replacement, has been vocal on U.S.–South Korea relations. With the retirement of Representative Henry Hyde from Congress, the U.S.–South Korea relationship has lost one of its most prominent commentators—sometime critic, overall supporter. With Representative Tom Lantos taking the reins of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, one can expect a much more muted approach to the U.S.–South Korea relationship when compared to Representative Hyde. On the other hand, as a human rights leader in the House, Lantos might be equally—if not more—inclined to press South Korea to take a tougher line against North Korea on human rights issues. The practical effect of Lantos’s defense of human rights could be to continue to highlight the great differences in Washington and Seoul on the best way to bring about change in North Korea.

That said, Chairman Lantos appears to be taking a generally optimistic approach to U.S.-ROK relations. At a hearing in 2006, he stated: “As I read from articles discussing the demise of the U.S.–South Korea alliance, I’m reminded of Mark Twain’s quote, ‘Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.’” He went on to note that the United States and South Korea may “no longer be best friends, but the myriad economic, political and security ties we share and the range of common interests between us remain very much alive...I remain convinced that far more unites our two nations than divides us.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Hearing of the House Committee on International Relations, “United States–Republic of Korea Relations: An Alliance at Risk?” Federal News Service, September 27, 2006.

Representative Lantos also has so far avoided dwelling on the different approaches to the North Korean threat. Instead he has stated, “the United States and South Korea share the common goal of a denuclearized North Korea at peace with its neighbors.”<sup>31</sup> Further emphasizing the point he has stated:

The United States and South Korea do not see eye to eye on North Korea. There is no point in trying to pretend that we do. But there is also no point in dwelling on the differences. We share the goal of ridding the Korean peninsula of nuclear weapons, and America’s diplomats should be working overtime with their counterparts in Korea and throughout the region to find new and creative ways to achieve that common objective.<sup>32</sup>

Representative Lantos has also urged the Bush administration to “make every effort—including at the highest levels—to coordinate new North Korean initiatives with all of our partners in the Six-Party Talks, including South Korea. Otherwise, our key allies will blame the United States for the talks’ failure, should it come to that, instead of the real and enduring source of difficulties, North Korea.”<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, he added:

If the South Koreans, Chinese and Japanese will not follow suit, a unilateral U.S. trade and investment ban will be ineffective and counterproductive to the prospects for a negotiated solution on the Korean peninsula. Unless we act in concert with our allies, the United States will lose the moral high ground on North Korea. Pyongyang will undoubtedly cite these new sanctions as evidence of hostile intent and strengthen its refusal to return to the Six-Party Talks. The focus will turn from Pyongyang’s destabilizing missile tests to Washington’s unilateral sanctions. This shift in focus and blame will further complicate the already difficult job of managing relations with our key allies in the region, including South Korea and Japan, particularly in the court of public opinion.<sup>34</sup>

On the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, with Joseph Biden taking over the chairmanship from Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), there likely will be little change in the committee’s position on U.S.–South Korea relations. Most attention, as with other national security committees, will remain focused on Iraq. With Senator Biden running for the Democratic presidential nomination, one can expect that the limited attention he pays to Asia will primarily be focused on dealing with China’s rise and the threat posed by North Korea. As with Chairman Lugar, it is likely that Biden will call for closer U.S.-ROK coordination on North Korea policy. Unlike the position taken by House Republicans in the 109th Congress (2005–2006), it is likely that Biden will place the onus on the Bush administration to craft a policy that brings the United States and the ROK closer together.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

With the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) chairmanship being taken over by Representative Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), one may expect somewhat greater oversight of changes in the U.S.-ROK military alliance. That said, Skelton will face the same challenge that his predecessor, Representative Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.), faced: the overwhelming majority of his attention will be focused on dealing with U.S. Iraq policy.

Likewise, the requirements of Iraq will consume most of the time of Carl Levin (D-Mich.), the new chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. The greatest attention that committee—as well as the HASC—pays to the U.S.-ROK military alliance comes in the annual regional combatant commander hearings in the first half of each year. If the recent pattern holds, questions will be dutifully answered by the commander UN Command/Combined Forces Command/U.S. Forces Korea (UNC/CFC/USFK); a periodic exchange of views will occur between the professional staff on the committee and those charged with managing the alliance in the Pentagon as well as in Korea; and there will be somewhat regular staff delegation trips to the Korean peninsula. However, the day-to-day running of the alliance will be left to the uniformed military and leading civilian officials in the Pentagon.

With Charles Rangel taking the chairmanship of the House Ways and Means, and Max Baucus (D-Mont.) taking the Senate Finance committee reins, one can expect greater attention to issues such as labor rights and environmental standards in U.S. trade agreements (along with automotive and agricultural concerns, as previously discussed). Given the excellent record of South Korea in the labor and environmental areas, one might not expect many problems from Capitol Hill on these topics. However, the question whether the KORUS agreement addresses these issues explicitly has become a small controversy that has complicated the congressional debate as of this writing. The issue has less to do with concerns about South Korea than it does about setting a standard for future U.S. free trade agreements. Whether this omission becomes a serious obstacle to implementation of the agreement is unlikely but remains to be seen.

It bears noting that Representative Rangel served in Korea during the Korean War and that he continues to remind listeners of the wounds he sustained there, as well as the deep bonds of friendship forged between Americans and Koreans during that searing experience.

## Closing

To better understand the overall challenges facing the U.S.-ROK relationship, a passage from a 2003 paper, entitled “Strengthening the U.S.-ROK Alliance: A Blueprint for the 21st Century,” merits quoting at length:

On its fiftieth anniversary, the alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) stands as one of the most successful relationships forged out of the Cold War. Important factors continue to tie the two countries together. First and foremost, the crisis over North Korea’s nuclear program demonstrates that a U.S. military presence remains necessary to defend the

integrity of the Republic of Korea. The two countries also share a commitment to liberal democracy, open economic markets, human rights, a free press and the rule of law. On top of that, the United States and the ROK enjoy extensive economic ties. Finally, there are close cultural bonds; almost two million Koreans have immigrated to the United States and the numbers continue to grow.

At the same time, at the start of the 21st century, the U.S.-ROK alliance is coping with several challenges. Most immediate is the challenge posed by North Korea and its nuclear weapons program. Furthermore, other developments have created doubts about the alliance's future, including: (1) a policy and perception gap between the United States and the ROK over how to deal with North Korea; (2) the emergence of nationalism and anti-American sentiments in South Korea; (3) U.S. policy post–September 11, which has fueled concerns over U.S. unilateralism and apparent devaluation of alliances; (4) China's growing influence on the peninsula; and (5) uncertainties about the future of Japan.

A modern, revitalized strategy is needed to take the alliance into the future.<sup>35</sup>

On Capitol Hill, most of these challenges receive relatively little attention from leading members of either chamber. The management of the relationship is left mainly to the executive branches in both countries. On the part of those who focus on the relationship, there is considerable uncertainty, if not distrust, regarding the current ROK political leadership, with many members and staff stating that they do not have a clear picture of the ROK's long-term plans for its relationship with the United States. This lack of trust is especially noticeable when contrasted with the close working relationship between Japan and the United States on Capitol Hill.

A lack of sustained deep thinking on Capitol Hill regarding the future of the U.S.-ROK relationship risks creating a self-fulfilling prophecy: South Korea mainly garners attention when something goes wrong, and there are few people on Capitol Hill with the trust in, or familiarity with, key issues affecting South Korea who can defend the relationship during difficult times.

In recent years, South Korean efforts in Washington have focused on three issues: (1) including the ROK in the Visa Waiver Program; (2) securing passage of “comfort women”/“sex slave” resolutions; and (3) increasing support for a bilateral free trade agreement. Members of Congress and their staff have commented that the ROK government and elites need to do more to educate members of Congress on the changes in thinking in South Korea regarding the U.S.-ROK relationship, the effect that such changes (e.g., the transfer of wartime operational control and the development of the ROK's “self-reliant” defense

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<sup>35</sup> “Strengthening the U.S.-ROK Alliance: A Blueprint for the 21st Century,” produced by CSIS, the Seoul Forum for International Affairs in the ROK, and the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, September 30, 2003, [http://www.csis.org/component/option,com\\_csis\\_pubs/task,view/id,1013/type,1/](http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task,view/id,1013/type,1/).

capability) will have on the basics of the U.S.-ROK military relationship, and most importantly, the differences between U.S. and ROK approaches to dealing with the threat posed by the DPRK.

## Recommendations

To safeguard the future of the special relationship between South Korea and the United States, more attention should be paid to the perspectives of the U.S. Congress. Deep personal and strategic ties forged during the Cold War are being replaced by, at best, unsettling impressions about the trajectory of the alliance and, at worst, by general apathy or ignorance. This is a poor foundation on which to place an important relationship during a time of transition. To maintain their vitality, alliances require understanding and commitment among policymakers and elites. While at the executive branch level there is some attention to redefining the future of the relationship, more attention needs to be given to understanding the role that Congress can play in strategic efforts to strengthen the alliance.

To this end, here are some recommendations for improving congressional attitudes regarding South Korea and the U.S.-ROK relationship more broadly.

- First, the South Korean government should clarify its own perspective on the future of U.S.-ROK relations, including how that relationship fits into South Korea's future foreign and security strategy and, in particular, how North Korea and other security issues fit into this picture. Uncertainty in the United States generally, and in the U.S. Congress specifically, about the trajectory of South Korean foreign and security policy is a core obstacle to redefining the future of the relationship and gaining congressional support in the process. Once defined, South Korea's vision for its strategic future ought to be carefully and candidly discussed with key counterparts in the Congress to dissipate continuing suspicions and build a foundation of support for the future.
- The U.S. and ROK governments should actively support and encourage official and semi-official dialogues to discuss the future of the relationship, and include key members of Congress and their staff in the process. As the alliance undergoes redefinition through dialogue, Congress needs to be integrated, and thus invested, in the process.
- South Korea should develop a long-term strategy to identify and develop congressional champions of the U.S.-ROK relationship. In Congress, even one or two key individuals in both the House and the Senate can have enormous influence on the perspectives of colleagues on an issue or relationship. Attention should be paid in particular to younger members of Congress with interest in international affairs. These members can form the core of the next generation of elites with an understanding of and commitment to the relationship.
- South Korea ought to focus its outreach to Congress on major political, economic, and strategic issues, rather than parochial matters. For instance,

ROK inclusion in the Visa Waiver Program is an important issue that the ROK government should advocate and Congress should address. But South Korea should ensure that its interactions with Capitol Hill enhance its image and stature as an important U.S. partner, while avoiding being perceived as another group with narrow interests.

- U.S.-ROK inter-parliamentary exchanges should include deep, substantive, and candid discussions of key issues in the relationship. While relationship building is always important, particularly within an Asian (and specifically Korean) context, members of Congress and their staff will view the relationship in a more serious and positive light if their interactions are substantive and frank and their limited time is used efficiently. Obviously, a reciprocal expectation will apply to the U.S. side. These exchanges should be bipartisan, or multipartisan, to ensure broad support for the relationship, and they should have a focused agenda. Doing the homework about the backgrounds of members of Congress before meetings is important, as is making the explicit case about how South Korea helps a member's constituents and U.S. interests more broadly.
- In the process, South Korean interlocutors should never take for granted the knowledge base of members of Congress or their staff about the benefits of the relationship in political, economic, or strategic terms; about alliance details; and about nuances of South Korean domestic political or social developments. Providing a frank, candid, and balanced assessment of these matters on a consistent basis will be critical to maintaining South Korea's profile on Capitol Hill and its level of support there.
- Finally, members of Congress and their staff must pay greater attention to the political, economic, and strategic benefits of the historic U.S.-ROK partnership, which promises to continue to expand beyond the traditional military relationship to encompass a full range of mutually beneficial ties. East Asia promises to grow in importance to U.S. interests in coming years, and the Korea peninsula will be at the center of this development in political, economic, cultural, social, and strategic terms. The U.S.–South Korea relationship is undergoing a necessary transition after more than half a century of success during the Cold War and beyond, success that has led to democracy and prosperity in South Korea and safeguarding of U.S. interests in East Asia. Understanding the nuances of Korean affairs, and of the U.S.-ROK relationship in particular, will be critical, requiring the U.S. Congress to take the initiative to build bilateral ties as the relationship is redefined in years to come. In the process, Congress should be more involved in bilateral dialogues and not be intimidated by media reports that sensationalize trips to South Korea as “junkets.” Such visits will be critical if the U.S. legislative branch is to become a key actor in this period of transition.

## About the Author

**Jason W. Forrester** is a visiting fellow in the CSIS International Security Program, where his research focuses on Asian security and nuclear terrorism prevention. Since January 2007, he has served as director of policy with Veterans for America, an organization addressing the causes, conduct, and consequences of war. From 2001 to 2003, he was director of research for the Nuclear Threat Reduction Campaign, a project of the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, the predecessor to Veterans for America. Subsequently, he was coordinator of the Kerry-Edwards campaign's national security policy teams, executive director of the Alliance for American Leadership, and a consultant to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. From 2005 to 2006, he was legislative assistant for foreign affairs and defense to Senator John D. Rockefeller IV (D-W.Va.). Mr. Forrester has also served as deputy foreign policy adviser on General Wesley Clark's presidential campaign and worked for the Brookings Institution, the Gore-Lieberman national security team, and the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict. He is a member of the International Institute of Strategic Studies and a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Mr. Forrester received an M.A.L.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and was graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a B.A. in political science from the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee.





