South Korea’s Engagement Strategy: Indications of an Asian Imbalance?

By Steven D. Park

Introduction and Background

The Obama administration’s “Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific” appeared to reaffirm the importance of the region for U.S. national interests and to reassure strategic partners and allies of U.S. commitments to the peace and stability in that part of the world. Yet, since 2011, when then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton introduced the need to pivot to new global realities, the United States has encountered a myriad of new or renewed security challenges in places around the world that have stubbornly demanded U.S. attention. Rather than accelerating the efforts to pivot and rebalance to Asia, the United States has had little choice but to focus on significant security problems in the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe. Instead of seeing a major shift in military resources to the Asia-Pacific

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region, any rebalance of U.S. forces appears to be shifting to Europe as a result of growing tensions with Russia.¹

In an effort to demonstrate U.S. commitment to the rebalance, the United States clarified the strategy and highlighted the importance of diplomatic and economic engagement, attempting to broaden the scope of the strategy beyond military capabilities alone. This recalibrated approach included some modest shifts in military forces into and within the region. However, the strategy placed a premium on promoting regional prosperity, with a particular focus on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade agreement with twelve countries in the Pacific Rim.

Although it is arguably the most important trading partner for countries in the region, China is not a member of the TPP. Instead, China has opted to develop its own bilateral and multilateral trading arrangements in the region, and has also recently founded the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB). Initially proposed in 2013, the bank began operations in December 2015. Over fifty states have joined the new investment bank as founding members. Some traditional allies of the United States, such as Great Britain, Germany, Australia, South Korea, and Taiwan, became founding members in spite of Washington’s objections.²

Given these challenges in prioritizing resources to the region, some states could view the rebalance as less than fully sufficient to address the security concerns in East Asia.³ Derek Chollet and Julianne Smith argue that America’s allies in Asia want more from the United States, including “a stronger U.S. naval presence, a maritime coalition of the willing, clarity on the conditions under which the U.S. would act militarily, and heavier engagement in regional institutions like ASEAN.”⁴ While there are no inter-state wars, domestic insurgencies, civil wars, or massive international terrorist threats facing states in the region, continued provocations by North Korea through its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, and unilateral actions by China in the South and East China Seas give states reason to be concerned about the long-term prospects for peace and stability in the region.

⁴Derek Chollet and Julianne Smith, “America’s Allies Want More From the US,” DefenseOne, August 3, 2015.
For smaller states, the insecurity stemming from a potentially unreliable great power ally are substantial. These smaller states often find themselves having no choice but to bandwagon with a larger, more powerful regional hegemon for their security. The mismatch of interests and the need for security in the relationship all but skews the power dynamic in favor of the larger and more powerful state. While larger states prefer to maintain freedom of action by engaging in support of their smaller allies only when their interests are at stake, smaller states make every effort to entangle their patron-state with binding commitments to ensure their security is fully guaranteed. Michael Beckley illustrated this principle by analyzing the alliance relationships the United States has had since WWII. Rather than loyalties trumping interest, Beckley showed that the United States endeavored to maintain freedom of action to engage in only those conflicts where its national interests were at stake.5

This mismatch of power dynamics creates a condition of near-constant insecurity for the smaller state, a situation where the larger state is simply unable to assure the unassurable smaller state of its commitments, even when its intentions are sincere and willful. Yet, smaller states are not relegated to simply facing existential threats by mere hope in the good graces of its security patron. Rather, as self-help would dictate, smaller states could pursue domestic policies that focus on economic growth as the foundation for technological innovation and a robust military. However, when domestic policies alone prove to be insufficient to fully satisfy a state’s security requirements, states could could begin engaging, even with erstwhile adversaries or potential threats, in an effort to reduce tensions.

For South Korea, such strategies for survival are nothing new. South Korea employs strategies that date back to the pre-modern Choson period, engaging in both a close relationship with a major power as well as nurturing cooperative relations with neighboring states, traditionally called kyorin. Choson Korea employed kyorin to reduce tensions with Japan. More recently, South Korea used these same strategies to enhance neighborly relations with North Korea to bring more stability to the peninsula.

South Korea is a small state facing the dilemma of relying on a great power for the preponderance of its security, yet having some concerns that its patron is not sufficiently capable of or willing to fully ensure peace and

stability in the region. This paper will analyze South Korea’s engagement with China as a result of its perspectives of the sufficiency of U.S. security commitments. An increasing trend in engagements may be an indication that South Korea perceives U.S. security commitments to be less than fully sufficient. Yet, even though unrealistic expectations in its security relationship with the United States may be the proximate cause for South Korea to seek engagement with China, South Korea continues to affirm that relationship as the single most important aspect of preserving its security. This paper will examine a number of security relationships that Korea has had in the past, using the traditional foreign policies of Choson as a framework to analyze its behavior in maintaining both a relationship with the major power in the region and, at the same time, engaging with other regional powers.

Korea’s Traditional Foreign Policies

While South Korea has the eleventh largest economy in the world and occupies an enviable seat at the G-20, its self-perceptions reflect the image of a small country that is unfortunately located in a conflict-prone neighborhood of relative giants. It is no wonder the Koreans often refer to themselves as shrimp among whales, noting with historical anguish the geopolitical realities of shrimps getting crushed when whales choose to fight.

Given the nature of Korea’s geographic proximity to larger and more powerful neighbors, foreign policy was an important tool for the Choson state, the Korean kingdom that ruled the peninsula until the 19th century. Its foreign policy of sadae (serving the great) promoted a close bandwagoning relationship with China, the regional hegemon. The perception that the kingdom could not adequately defend itself and secure its sovereignty necessitated a foreign policy toward China based on sadae. Choson accepted a position as a junior state vis-a-vis Ming China, not unlike a younger brother of filial piety in a Confucian world order.\(^6\) The Choson court made every effort to maintain positive relations with the older brother, Ming China. Choson sent four regular embassies each year, “to offer New Year’s felicitations, to congratulate the Ming emperor on his birthday, to honor the birthday of the imperial crown prince, and to mark the passing of the winter

Choson sent additional embassies for other irregular events, such as the death of the Chinese emperor, a succession to the throne, or when China formally invested a queen. The Choson embassies offered tributary gifts to affirm the superior position of Ming China. In return, Ming China would grant recognition of the legitimacy of the Yi dynasty’s rule in Choson as well as provide lavish gifts from the imperial court.

Choson Korea had little choice but to offer itself as a tribute state to the larger and more powerful Ming China. In Sources of Korean Tradition, Peter H. Lee and Wm. Theodore De Bary point out, “The configuration of power so favored China that Korea had no choice but to remain friendly… Under these conditions, Korea simply could not afford to lose China’s friendship, even if it meant accepting the status of a junior state.”

The strategic balance of power was skewed in favor of China throughout the region. An alliance with China entailed accepting a junior position in the Sinocentric world order. However, as a junior state, Choson could rely on and expect security guarantees from China in return for its allegiance. So long as China retained its position of pre-eminent strength and communicated its resolve to use that strength on behalf of its tribute states, other powers in the region would dare not threaten Choson.

However, even with its continuing reliance on China for security, Choson also pursued a separate foreign policy of kyorin (neighborly relations) with other neighbors, especially when Choson perceived its principal policy of sa-dae as being insufficient to fully satisfy its security requirements. The foreign policy of kyorin was a policy of strategic engagement in which Choson could attempt to reduce tensions and promote peaceful coexistence with a neighboring state. Choson initially implemented kyorin in 1405, when the third Ashikaga shogun received his investiture by the Ming as “King of Japan.”

Although King T’aejong of Choson had received his investiture a year earlier in 1404, the Ming’s blessing on Japan placed it on equal footing with Choson. Because of the special relationship Korea had with China, Korea considered itself a more loyal vassal state, a better model of Confucian principles, and,

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8 Lee and De Barry, Sources of Korean Tradition, 267.
10 Bruce Cumings, Korea’s Place in the Sun: A Modern History (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 91.
therefore, a more civilized people. This cultural discrimination resulted in minimal contact and engagement with Japan during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Bruce Cumings writes of this period,

Korean embassies visited Edo from time to time, but merely to exchange messages and gifts; it was a relationship of equality, but not a very important one to Koreans. Neither was it one to be feared. Koreans, after all, not only thought themselves to be but in fact were closer to the fount of Chinese civilization. . . . [T]hey used this proximity to look down on Japanese civilization.\textsuperscript{11}

However, this relationship, that more resembled benign neglect than neighborly relations, took a dramatic turn at the end of the 16th century. Significant restrictions on trade with Choson would serve as a pretext for Japan’s invasion of Korea and the beginning of the \textit{Imjin Waeran}.\textsuperscript{12} Only after Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s invasion and seven years of war would Choson not only take the threat of Japan seriously, but would also begin in earnest to cultivate neighborly relations.\textsuperscript{13} To Choson, the distribution of power in the interstate system changed dramatically with the rise of a powerful Japan, a state that China appeared to be ineffective in deterring. While Ming China dispatched military forces to assist Choson, the scale of destruction on the Korean Peninsula left the Choson leadership seeking alternative means of securing peace with its island neighbor. Korea began to implement in earnest the foreign policy of \textit{kyorin} that it had neglected for two centuries. Rather than seeking to isolate Japan from continental affairs, Choson Korea chose to seek normalized and more neighborly relations. After normalization, and for the next two centuries, Choson Korea regularly dispatched envoys to Tokugawa Japan, sending a total of twelve embassies that averaged one every sixteen years, with retinues averaging 446 people.\textsuperscript{14}

The policies of \textit{sadae} and \textit{kyorin} taken together demonstrate the Choson state’s efforts at maintaining security in a geopolitically adversarial environment. Although Choson continued to prioritize \textit{sadae} as the principal

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13}Lee and De Barry, \textit{Sources of Korean Tradition}, 267.
means by which its security was preserved, kyorin became a critical element when its confidence in China’s ability to effectively manage peace and stability in the region had eroded to the point where Choson Korea understood that it would need to take a greater role in its own security matters. Japan’s threat to Korea’s security, experienced during the Imjin Waeran, was such that deterrence, in the form of a bandwagoning relationship with China, was not an absolutely reliable strategy for maintaining state security. Only through strategic engagement could Choson Korea reduce the threat that Japan posed to the state. This approach did not prevent aggressive actions by Japan in the late 19th century and its eventual colonization of Korea in 1910. However, South Korea’s sadae relationship with China had clear limitations, and South Korea assessed it required additional measures of security, even measures that also had limitations.

**South Korea’s Sunshine Policy Toward North Korea**

Since its inception as a state in 1948, South Korea has continued to prefer the traditional Choson policy of sadae. One could argue that Korea has had this policy preference for the past five centuries. Although the patron that Korea held as its security guarantor changed, Korea consistently sought a strong state to ensure its own security. The shock of the British soundly defeating China in the first and second Opium Wars, followed by the Japanese similarly defeating China in the late 19th century, necessitated a reevaluation of the patron state that could provide security to Choson. At the close of the 19th century, Choson’s desperate search for a new regional hegemon with which to forge a sadae relationship led to a frenetic series of alliances with the United States (1882), China (1882), and ultimately Russia (1896). Beginning with the liberation and division of the peninsula, South Korea preferred to bandwagon with the United States, which was the new regional hegemon of Northeast Asia and the only global superpower in the post-Cold War era. Paul Chamberlin writes that the reliance on the United States can be viewed as an application of the elder brother-younger brother family relationship applied to international relations.\(^{15}\) While both parties make great efforts to describe the alliance as one of equal partners, the Republic of Korea (ROK)-U.S. alliance is but a continuation of Korea’s traditional foreign policy of sadae.

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Prior to 1997, policies of the conservative South Korean government emphasized the use of physical deterrence and other hard-line measures to isolate and contain North Korea, and to force constructive behavioral changes in the North. Although South Korea continued to maintain its close military alliance with the United States, a number of factors caused South Korea’s leadership to view that relationship as insufficient in maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea’s nuclear ambitions in the early 1990s, the perceived unilateral actions by the United States to address those threats, and growing anti-American sentiment among young, progressive liberals led to South Korea’s consideration of alternative approaches to ensuring security and mitigating risks.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Kim Dae-jung and Roo Moo-hyun administrations employed the Sunshine Policy toward North Korea. This policy prescribed deliberate actions and displays of goodwill toward North Korea in order to build mutual confidence and reduce hostile tensions on the peninsula. These were efforts at establishing neighborly relations between the two Koreas.

The name Sunshine Policy was itself derived from Aesop’s fable, in which “in a contest to determine which was the stronger, the Sun, not the Wind, succeeds in getting a man to take off his heavy coat.” The policy subtly refuted the conservative approach the government took toward North Korea during the previous five decades as both ineffective and counterproductive. Just as the Wind caused the man to pull his coat on even tighter, the name of the policy implied that previous conservative policies might have even contributed to a more hostile and belligerent North. Instead, displays of good will, or the warming effect of the Sun on the man with the coat, were the preferred method for getting North Korea to voluntarily reform its behavior.

Kim may have also been sufficiently concerned that the United States was willing to take unilateral military action in 1994 against North Korea for its nuclear program at Yongbyon, an action that would most likely have brought war to the peninsula. Given the understanding that the United States could drag an unwilling South Korea into war on the peninsula, some

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17 Ibid.
in South Korea considered the United States a bigger threat than North Korea. In a 1999 opinion poll taken in South Korea, only 1.1 percent of respondents viewed North Korea as a threat to South Korea’s security, compared with 18.8 percent of respondents who viewed the United States as a threat.\textsuperscript{18}

Although Kim Dae-jung reoriented South Korea’s policies on North Korea toward an engagement strategy, he nonetheless did not abandon the security alliance with the United States, continuing instead to affirm the importance of the relationship to South Korea’s national interest. Kim Dae-jung was a consistent advocate of the U.S. military presence in Korea. In a meeting in 2002 with the new U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) and Combined Forces Command (CFC) Commander, General Leon LaPorte, President Kim stated, “Korea’s security and peace on the peninsula continues to be the traditional ROK-US alliance relationship, and the ROK-US CFC is the key point in the ROK-US security alliance.”\textsuperscript{19} While Kim Dae-jung regretfully acknowledged that there was growing criticism of U.S. troops stationed in Korea, he stated nonetheless that the U.S. military in South Korea was “needed for the stability of Northeast Asia, as well as the Korean peninsula.”\textsuperscript{20}

While Kim continued to believe that the security relationship with the United States was crucial, he assessed that the ROK-U.S. alliance was not fully sufficient to satisfy South Korea’s security requirements. South Korea needed to take actions on its own behalf to mitigate the threats from North Korea, which prompted Kim to implement the Sunshine Policy of engaging its northern neighbor.

**The U.S. Role as a Security Patron**

As in the the past, South Korea continues to maintain a sadae relationship with the United States as the primary external source of security. President Park Geun-hye views the United States as South Korea’s principal guarantor of security, just as each of her predecessors had. Following her October 2015 summit meeting with President Obama, the two presidents released a

\textsuperscript{18} Norman D. Levin and Yong-Sup Han, *The Shape of Korea’s Future: South Korean Attitudes Toward Unification and Long-Term Security Issues* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1999), 18.


\textsuperscript{20} “Kim says U.S. troops are essential,” *JoongAng Ilbo*, January 9, 2002.
The United States-Republic of Korea alliance remains committed to countering the threat to peace and security posed by North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs as well as other provocations. We will maintain our robust deterrence posture and continue to modernize our alliance and enhance our close collaboration to better respond to all forms of North Korean provocations.21

For its part, the United States has attempted to reassure its ally with both public statements as well as the permanent presence of U.S. military forces in South Korea. During the 47th Security Consultative Meeting in Seoul in November 2015, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter and South Korean Minister of National Defense Han Min-koo “reaffirmed the two nations’ mutual commitment to the fundamental mission of the alliance to defend the ROK through a robust combined defense posture, as well as to the enhancement of mutual security based on the ROK-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty.”22 Secretary Carter additionally “reiterated the firm and unwavering U.S. commitment to the defense of the ROK using U.S. forces and capabilities postured on the Korean Peninsula and globally available.”23 Taken together, these statements appear to show South Korea’s continued reliance on the United States for security, as well as the U.S. willingness and commitment to provide that security.

Yet, over the past two decades, South Korea has seen the United States repositioning in the Asia-Pacific region in ways that make it less likely that it will find itself entangled in alliance commitments. The repositioning of U.S. forces in South Korea away from the Demilitarized Zone and further to the south, out of range of North Korea’s artillery forces, is an effort by the United States to restructure its forces based on current operational plans and to provide better protection for those forces on the peninsula. However, some could view the move as an indication of American uneasiness for U.S. troops remaining in harm’s way, or for U.S. casualties to be used as a trigger for U.S. intervention.

23Ibid.
The rebalance to Asia has not resulted in a substantial net increase of U.S. military forces in the region or in South Korea specifically. There are currently approximately 28,500 U.S. troops stationed in South Korea. In 2004, the United States developed a force posture plan that would reduce the 37,000 troops in South Korea down to 25,000 by 2008. However, in 2008, the United States offered to maintain a floor of 28,500 troops, a proposal welcomed by the new South Korean President Lee Myung-bak.

At the 47th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting in Seoul, Secretary Carter reaffirmed “the continued U.S. commitment to provide and strengthen extended deterrence for the ROK using the full range of military capabilities, including the U.S. nuclear umbrella, conventional strike and missile defense capabilities.” However, and within months of taking office, President Obama indicated at a speech in Prague his intent to eliminate nuclear weapons. He proclaimed, “I state clearly and with conviction America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.” Although President Obama indicated that his goal would take years to accomplish, many allies raised concerns that the global environment required the U.S. nuclear umbrella and their dependence on it for security. And given North Korea’s continued advances in its nuclear program, South Korea is probably compelled to rely even more on the deterrence value of the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

Engaging China to Influence North Korea

Since normalizing relations with China in 1992, South Korea has used its relationship with China to influence the China-North Korea relationship. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, China has provided most of North Korea’s energy and food assistance in an effort to maintain stability along its border. Nicholas Eberstadt, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise

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25 Ibid.
Institute, notes that “China is currently North Korea’s only economic backer of any importance.”

South Korea has attempted to influence China to use its considerable leverage over North Korea to induce behavior that would result in greater stability on the peninsula. This process of engaging China could be viewed as a *kyorin* policy of engagement, albeit one that is indirect in its attempt to mitigate the threat from a third party. South Korea turning to China to attempt to mitigate these security risks is an indicator that South Korea may not view the relationship with the United States alone as sufficient to accomplish this task.

President Park has purposefully engaged China on a number of fronts since taking office in February 2013. She met with President Xi Jinping on six separate occasions, including four bilateral summit meetings. In September 2015, Park attended the Chinese commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, an event that most other invited heads of state skipped. However, at that meeting, Park and Xi are reported to have discussed Korean unification, a previously taboo subject for China. South Korea, along with Japan, has engaged China in annual trilateral summit meetings, the last having taken place in November 2015 in Seoul. These trilateral meetings focus on the international relations between the three states in Northeast Asia, particularly trade and economic relations. The meetings also provide opportunities to discuss security issues. At the last meeting, Park, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe issued a Joint Declaration for Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia, affirming that a deepening of trilateral cooperation will contribute to the “realization of peace, stability and prosperity in Northeast Asia.” More specifically, the Joint Declaration reaffirmed the trilateral group’s “firm opposition to the development of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula,” as well as noting Chinese and Japanese support for “overcoming national division on the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner.”

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29Ibid.
31Joint Declaration for Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia, Trilateral Summit of Japan, China, and South Korea, November 1, 2015.
32Ibid.
On the economic front, South Korea and China officially signed a bilateral free trade agreement in June 2015 that will cover almost $300 billion in trade in goods and services between the two countries.\textsuperscript{33} China may seek to use its bilateral trade agreement with South Korea to build a trilateral free trade agreement with South Korea and Japan, which would incorporate the three largest economies of Asia in a single trading network that would make up 20 percent of the world’s total gross domestic product.\textsuperscript{34} Although South Korea has cautiously endorsed the U.S.-proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), it has also announced its decision to become a founding member of China’s proposed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). It made the announcement on March 26, 2015, only five days before the deadline to apply to become a founding member. Additionally, it did so in spite of warnings from the United States that the AIIB had questionable standards of governance and environmental and social safeguards.\textsuperscript{35}

This engagement by South Korea plays well for China’s regional strategy. Since the inception of its Two-Korea policy following normalized relations with South Korea, China has attempted to maintain an equidistant relationship with both Koreas. Maintaining a supportive relationship with North Korea prevents instability in the region due to a complete state failure. Simultaneously developing closer economic relations with South Korea allows China to acquire much needed capital inflows and technology transfers. According to Larry Wortzel, China has had a clear set of goals in its actions on the Korean Peninsula since the 1990s:

Maintaining a peaceful periphery to facilitate foreign investment and the modernization of its arms and combat forces; reducing the likelihood that missile defenses will be deployed in the region; creating a buffer from financial crises that might retard science and technology modernization; replacing American alliances with regional security dialogues; and creating a


\textsuperscript{34}Shannon Tiezzi, “China-Japan-South Korea Hold FTA Talks Despite Political Tension,” The Diplomat, March 5, 2014.

\textsuperscript{35}Tetsushi Kajimoto and Ian Chua, “Japan and Australia Are Ignoring Warnings From the US Not to Join China’s New Bank,” Business Insider, March 20, 2015.
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web of strategic partnerships as a means to place itself at the hub of inter-state diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region.\(^{36}\)

Although South Korea may not necessarily view China as a direct security threat, it has had to navigate an awkward landscape that stems from its alliance relationship with the United States and its political values, balanced against its geographical proximity to a rising China. South Korea continues to watch with uneasiness the growing tension between a rejuvenated China and the United States. South Korea is confronted with the realities that the United States continues to view with suspicion a China that is willing to use military and economic strength to buttress its foreign policy objectives. Former South Korean President Roo Moo-hyun envisioned South Korea’s role in the region as that of “balancer” of Northeast Asia.\(^{37}\) Some interpreted the phrase to indicate a preference for maintaining a balanced relationship between the United States and North Korea. Others interpreted the balance to be between the United States and China. Although this paper primarily argues that South Korea’s efforts to establish a \textit{kyorin} relationship with China had more to do with influencing North Korea and the reduction of threat on the Korean Peninsula, it is not implausible that this relationship could also be viewed as a way of mitigating tension with China that stems from South Korea’s alliance relationship with the United States.

An Asian Rebalance or Imbalance?

South Korea’s foreign policy appears to continue to prefer a \textit{sadae} relationship with the United States. An example of this preference was former President Roh Moo-hyun’s decision in 2003 to support the U.S. request for a South Korean troop deployment to Iraq. When the United States initially made the request, to the surprise of many, Roh supported the request by saying that “realism” required South Korea to support the United States.\(^{38}\) However, due to enormous domestic public dissent, the South Korean National Assembly decided to twice postpone a vote to authorize the deployment. Roh’s


urgent public speech, calling on the National Assembly to quickly vote in favor of the resolution, was an indicator that he understood the importance of aligning South Korean interests with those of the United States. Although Roh had limited the number of troops to be dispatched to Iraq to no more than 3,000, the figure represented South Korea’s largest military deployment outside the peninsula since the Vietnam War.

More recently, South Korea’s support for the deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system is another indication that South Korea remains more closely aligned with the United States. The missile defense capabilities of the THAAD system will most likely create friction in South Korea’s relationship with China, which has long objected to such a capability on the peninsula. U.S. officials have well understood the challenges of discussing missile defense with South Korea for that very reason. Yet, the January 2016 nuclear test and successful February 2016 satellite launch by North Korea appear to have shifted South Korea’s calculation of its security enough to warrant the risk of friction with China. In a January 2016 address to the nation, Park stated that the deployment of THAAD “will be considered based on [South Korea’s] security and national interests and also by taking into account the North’s nuclear and missile threats.”

Perhaps part of the shift in South Korea’s strategic calculations on missile defense has to do with the perception that China is unwilling to exercise significant influence over North Korea, especially given China’s priority of maintaining the status quo as the “least bad option.” Although China continues to maintain a military alliance with North Korea, it is far from the close “lips and teeth” relationship that characterized it during and following the Korean War. Instead, there are indications that China is clearly displeased with North Korea’s behavior. While Xi has not met with Kim Jong-un as of the writing of this article, he has traveled to South Korea to meet President Park. Xi is the first Chinese president to have visited Seoul before going to Pyongyang. In spite of North Korea’s provocative actions, China seems unwilling or unable to influence North Korea to alter its behavior. While a provocative, nuclear-testing North Korea on its border may be suboptimal, China appears to prefer the status quo over the potential risks stemming from a collapse or conflict scenario. Scott Snyder, a senior

fellow with the Council on Foreign Relations, writes, “there is no reason to think that political risks emanating from North Korea will lead China to withdraw its economic safety net for North Korea any time soon.” So South Korea’s apparent decision to approve a THAAD deployment, in the face of Chinese opposition, appears to be a carefully considered calculation of policies that best mitigates security risks to the state.

As important as the foreign policy of sadae is to understanding the strategic concerns of Choson and South Korea, equally important is the implementation of the foreign policy of kyorin. A precarious geopolitical environment for Choson necessitated a foreign policy that was more expansive than one relying solely on an alliance with the regional superpower, China. Establishing neighborly relations with Japan was a rational strategy for Choson. Choson maintained a sadae relationship with China, the critical element to its foreign policy, while at the same time engaging Japan in order to reduce tensions and the potential for direct conflict between the two states.

These traditional elements continue to serve as threads of continuity in South Korea’s foreign policy. The United States is now the regional hegemon of Northeast Asia, and the object of South Korea’s foreign policy of sadae. Yet, South Korea continues to engage neighboring states, all the while maintaining a bandwagoning relationship with the United States. South Korea’s Sunshine Policy was an example of a modern effort to implement a traditional foreign policy of kyorin, an attempt at strategic engagement to reduce hostile tensions between the two Koreas. South Korea could not rely solely on the credibility of deterrence from the ROK-U.S. alliance to ensure its security.

South Korea also appears to be implementing a form of strategic engagement with China. Although the strategic engagement with China may be an indirect way of attempting to gain China’s support to influence North Korea’s behavior, it could just as easily be a strategy to reduce tensions with China itself. With the possibilities of growing tension between China and its chief security patron, the United States, South Korea finds itself in an awkward position of having to deal with its security ally on the one hand, and a growing regional neighbor on the other.

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Given South Korea’s deepening engagement with China, one could make the argument that South Korea is not fully convinced that the U.S. rebalance to Asia has effectively addressed its security concerns. The United States appears unable to modify North Korea’s behavior and thereby mitigate the risk of conflict on the Korean Peninsula. The future of the U.S.-China relationship and the ability for the great powers to manage the relationship to avoid the potential for conflict have significant challenges. In response to a perceived inability of the great power to fully provide security, South Korea could develop greater capabilities to strengthen its own security. Some conservatives in South Korea have “never fully trusted Washington’s commitment to their defense or China’s promise to help halt North Korea’s nuclear program.” These conservatives have called for the country to begin its own nuclear weapons program. A survey conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in 2013 found that two-thirds of respondents in Seoul supported the development of an indigenous nuclear weapons program. Mark Fitzpatrick considers a number of states in East Asia to be latent nuclear powers because of their robust civilian nuclear energy programs, giving them the potential to quickly transition into a nuclear weapons state should a sufficient threat warrant such a deterrent.

Although it is unlikely that South Korea will take the path toward developing its own nuclear weapons program to satisfy its security requirements, a more likely approach could be to continue nurturing a kyorin relationship with China. Although this kyorin relationship with China has not necessarily had the anticipated effect on North Korea, the alternatives are less desirable. Should North Korea continue its nuclear tests, missile launches, and other provocative activities, South Korea will probably perceive that the risks stemming from the security situation on the peninsula to be unacceptably high. Given the growing tensions on the peninsula, an inability to deal with risks through its own military capabilities alone, and a perception that the United States may not sufficiently satisfy the emerging security challenges in the region with its rebalance, strategic engagement with China could be one of very few reasonable alternatives South Korea has to mitigate its security risks.

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43Ibid.
44Mark Fitzpatrick, Asia’s Latent Nuclear Powers: Japan, South Korea and Taiwan (London: Routledge, 2016).
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Conclusion

The Obama administration has made efforts to rebalance to Asia, emphasizing both the importance of the region and the role of the United States in preserving its stability. However, South Korea’s perceptions, as well as those of others in the region, of a lack of credibility in a U.S. commitment to the security of the Asia-Pacific could necessitate a reevaluation of its security. This could entail taking security matters into its own hands through a kyorin relationship with China. Instead of a rebalance in Asia, the region could appear more and more tied to China to mitigate the security challenges. The United States could find that power dynamics in Asia have become imbalanced.