



## **China-ROK-U.S. Relations and Regional Security in Northeast Asia** by Scott Snyder and Ah-Young Kim

Security relationships in Northeast Asia have remained largely unchanged since the end of the Cold War. In this year's Special Annual Issue of *Comparative Connections* [<http://www.csis.org/pacfor/annual/2003annual.html>], we argue that cracks are appearing in the Cold War façade. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China-ROK-U.S. relations will shape the future direction of Northeast Asia, the Korean Peninsula, and the prospects for cooperation, conflict, and competition.

The China-ROK-U.S. relationship has been evolving; understanding this triangular relationship requires examining it as a whole and on individual levels. On the first level, the PRC's policy toward the Korean Peninsula has changed: its policy of equidistance between North-South in the 1990s has given way to a position that appears to tilt toward South Korea. North Korean nuclear crises not only changed the PRC's orientation, but also created a new diplomatic role for China vis-à-vis its Korean neighbors and the U.S., signaling a potentially more activist and indispensable role for Beijing in contributing to regional stability.

The successful economic relationship between the PRC and the ROK has increased bilateral ties and enhanced China's economic influence with South Korea. Currently, trade between the two is growing 20 percent a year, and is projected to reach \$100 billion by 2008. Greater China (including Hong Kong) has replaced the United States as South Korea's number one trading partner (2002) and destination for foreign investment. Both the PRC and the ROK have recognized the importance of economic integration as a tool – not only in reducing regional conflict (cross-Strait, inter-Korean) but also in limiting possibilities of future confrontation.

The U.S.-PRC relationship provides the overall context. The bilateral U.S.-PRC relationship has oscillated between high and low points in recent years, but both nations have maintained continued cooperation and have adapted to changed U.S. priorities in combating terrorism and proliferation of WMD. The two countries share common views on many WMD and nonproliferation related concerns, as well as the three “no's” policy vis-à-vis the Korean Peninsula (no nukes, no war, no collapse of the DPRK). However, there is an asymmetry in tolerance of risk related to WMD threats and the details of any deal to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula will be contentious and difficult to work out.

The U.S.-ROK relationship has successfully deterred the North, for 50 years. However, core policies of the respective leaderships have challenged the security alliance. The U.S. global security strategy, which emphasizes “versatility, mobility, and flexibility” and President Roh's calls for a more equal ROK-U.S. alliance have suggested diverging views on the context (regional vs. global), content (military vs.

political/neutral), and construction of South Korea's security. Additionally, the restructuring of U.S. Forces in Korea, Seoul's seeming reluctance to defend the alliance to the public, and the question of how to effectively deal with North Korea have highlighted the need for policy coordination and consultations. The ROK must realize that its prosperous trade relationship with China is based on the stability of the U.S.-ROK security alliance, while Korea's continued liberalization and a strong U.S. economic presence are an important foundation for ensuring that the ROK remains orientated toward and continues to share values with the U.S. despite ROK's newfound fondness and attraction for the PRC.

Many questions remain for the China-ROK-U.S. trilateral relationship. Does China's active diplomatic role in brokering multilateral talks indicate a shift from a U.S.-led hegemonic stability to the beginning of a political/diplomatic transition with a rising China taking a central role? If denuclearization of North Korea proves to be impossible absent regime change, is it possible to imagine joint U.S.-PRC action to accomplish this? If the PRC is called upon to play a peacekeeping role on the Peninsula, what will this mean for the U.S.-ROK alliance? How will ROK public opinion regard the U.S. and the PRC? How will the trilateral relationship affect other neighbors? Many of the questions point to a new security order beyond the immediate nuclear threat posed by North Korea. The process of dealing with North Korea will reveal the extent to which economic and political factors have worked to shape future perceptions, strategies, and policy choices of the China-ROK-U.S. trilateral relationship.

*Scott Snyder is the Korea representative of The Asia Foundation and Ah-Young Kim is Vasey Fellow at Pacific Forum CSIS. This article is drawn from the executive summary of “China-ROK-U.S. Relations and Regional Security in Northeast Asia,” the July 2003 Special Annual Issue of Comparative Connections, available on the Pacific Forum CSIS website [<http://www.csis.org/pacfor/>].*