

China's "Peaceful Rise:" Implications for US Interests in Korea

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Beginning in 2003, Chinese leaders began a new stage in China's efforts to define China's approach toward its neighboring countries and what China's approach meant for the United States and US interests in Asia and the world. Premier Wen Jiabao addressed the topic of China's peaceful rise in a speech in New York on December 9, 2003.¹ Despite such high level pronouncements, the exact purpose and scope of the new emphasis on China's "peaceful rise" remained less than clear to Chinese and foreign specialists.² Consultations in May 2004 with 50 Chinese officials and non-government specialists closely involved in this issue helped to clarify the state of play in Chinese decision-making circles regarding China's peaceful rise and what it meant for China's approach to Korea and the rest of Asia and for US interests and policy in the region.

In Asian and world affairs, the Chinese approach builds on the moderation and flexibility shown in Chinese foreign policy in recent years. According to senior Party strategists and other officials, Chinese leaders reviewed the negative experiences of China's past confrontations with neighbors and other powers, and the negative experiences of earlier rising powers, such as Germany and Japan in the 20th century, to conclude that China cannot reach its goals of economic modernization and development through confrontation and conflict. As a result, they incorporated the moderate features of China's recent approach to Asia and the world into their broader definition of China's peaceful rise.

Thus, China was expected to become even more active in economic, political, and security interaction with nearby countries, attempting to reassure them that China's rise is not a threat to their interests. China will pursue mutually beneficial economic schemes that will assist the economic rise of China's neighbors as well as China. Such "win-win" approaches also will be applied to political and security issues. Chinese participation in various regional and global multilateral organizations will advance, allowing China to become more fully integrated into the prevailing regional and global order, and in the process permitting Chinese officials to interact

more closely in moderate and flexible ways with neighboring governments and concerned powers.

A central feature of the Chinese approach is a very clear and carefully balanced recognition of the power and influence of the United States. In the post Cold War period, the Chinese leadership often worked against and confronted US power and influence in world affairs. China resisted the US superpower-led world order, seeking a multipolar world of several powers in which China would enjoy more influence and room for maneuver. In recent years, Chinese leaders have reevaluated this approach. Adopting a more pragmatic attitude to the continued unipolar world led by the United States, they acknowledged and gave more prominence to the fact that US power and influence actually serves many important Chinese interests. For example, it guarantees the sea lines of communication so important for oil imports coming to China, it helps keep stability in the Korean peninsula, and it provides important leadership in the war on terrorism.

Greater pragmatism and a strong desire to offset views in the United States that saw rising China as a competitor and a threat has prompted Chinese leaders and officials to narrow sharply their view of areas of difference with the United States. Most differences with the United States now seemed to center on the Taiwan issue and US continued support for Taiwan. The wide range of other Chinese complaints about US "hegemonism" in the post cold war period has been reduced.

In this more improved atmosphere, Chinese leaders have sought to build closer ties with America. They have wished to integrate China more closely in the Asian and world system, which they have seen as likely to continue to be dominated by US power for many years to come. They have pursued closer partnership with the US leaders and have wanted to avoid taking steps that would cause the US leaders to see China as a danger or threat that would warrant a concerted US resistance to Chinese development and ambitions. At the same time, they have not abandoned their past differences with US hegemonism. They still have disapproved of perceived US domination and unilateralism seen in US practices in Iraq, US missile defense programs, US strengthening alliance relations with Japan, NATO expansion, and other areas that have been staples in the repertoire of Chinese criticism of US post cold war practices. But Chinese officials have not been prepared to raise such issues as significant problems in US China relations, unless

they impinged directly on core Chinese interests. As a result, most important Chinese criticism of US policy has tended to focus on issues related to disputes over Taiwan.

China's "peaceful rise:" issues of debate and concern

Consultations with Chinese officials and specialists concerned with the process of defining the purpose and scope of China's peaceful rise showed several areas of concern and debate. Inside China, the new approach was not well understood. The decision to articulate this new approach with its remarkably moderate and pragmatic approach toward the United States and China's neighbors was done at high levels. It was said to be subject to continued debate within the leadership. Some Chinese specialists advised that China could revert to a harder approach if the current moderate stance were seen as not working effectively for Chinese interests. They warned that Chinese "hardliners" could reemerge under some circumstances.

Meanwhile middle and lower level specialists who were taken by surprise by the moderation seen in the recent Chinese foreign policy approach adjusted and followed the Party line, but there was great uncertainty about broader public opinion in China that remained closer to a more hard edged Chinese posture toward the United States and other powers, notably Japan, that were perceived as working against Chinese national interests.

In addition to issues inside China, Chinese specialists also saw complications and issues for China's peaceful rise approach posed by forces outside China. In general, they expressed concern that the viability of the new peaceful approach depended greatly on the reaction of concerned powers and developments in sensitive areas. Heading the list was Taiwan where President Chen Shui-bian's strongly assertive posture toward redefining Taiwan's legal status through constitutional revision elicited Chinese warnings of war. Chinese officials expected the United States to take a direct role in curbing Chen Shui-bian's pro-independence leanings. They were pleased with US statements warning Chen not to disrupt the status quo, but were skeptical such moves would be enough. They pressed for curbs in US military support for the Taiwan leader. This issue—a core concern for Chinese leaders—underlined Chinese worry that their peaceful rise approach would not elicit appropriate US responses. Continued strong US opposition to Chinese interests

on Taiwan could prompt a Chinese reevaluation of the viability of the recent peaceful approach, they averred.

Japan posed a special impediment to China's approach to Asia. Unlike the case of the United States, Chinese leaders did not mute most differences with Japan. Though media coverage of differences in Sino-Japanese relations was less than in the 1990s, it was much more prevalent than in the case of the United States. Reasons offered by Chinese specialists included the Japanese Prime Minister's continued visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, Japan's refusal to acknowledge past aggression in ways acceptable to China, and domestic politics in both Japan and China. In general, Chinese specialists recognized that continued friction in China-Japan relations complicated the attractiveness of China's peaceful rise strategy in Asia, but they were pessimistic that there would be any diminishment of such differences in the near future.

Though China was seen to have had considerable success in improving relations with South Korea and ASEAN, there was concern among some Chinese specialists about the reactions of Russia and India to China's rise. Though Chinese relations with both Moscow and New Delhi were good, there were perceived tendencies by these powers to maneuver with the United States, Japan and in other ways to insure that their power and influence relative to China was not seriously diminished as a result of China's rise. Such perceived "balancing" of China was said to be a secondary concern to Chinese officials, though it represented an adverse trend that worked against Chinese interests in Asia.

Because of its perceived power and influence, the United States loomed large in Chinese specialists' calculation of possible problems for China's peaceful rise approach. In general, the success or failure of the Chinese initiative depended on the reaction of the United States. If US policy turned from the recent trend of seeking convergence with China and resumed an approach viewing China as a strategic competitor, Chinese leaders were thought likely to reevaluate their foreign policy and adopt a more confrontational posture in return. This was seen as especially likely if US hardening affected Chinese interests in Taiwan.

Chinese specialists duly acknowledged that there remained broad segments of US opinion and interest groups disposed to be negative and suspicious of China and its policies.⁵ Many American groups had participated actively in the vocal debates over US China policy after the cold war and saw a wide range of continuing

differences between China and the United States over political, economic, security and other issues. In the view of these Americans, the US-China relations remained the most complicated and contentious US bilateral relationship after the Cold War. The major shift in US strategic attention to the war on terrorism and the conflicts in Iraq and Southwest Asia had distracted attention away from China, but had not ended suspicion and wariness by many Americans.

These Americans were not inclined to accept without careful verification Chinese assurances of peaceful intent. The Chinese peaceful rise approach played down Chinese negative treatment and criticism of the United States on most issues, with the notable exception of Taiwan, but this did not necessarily assuage American critics of China. For example, US security planners and related specialists in intelligence and other departments in the US government and supporting non-government agencies had been compelled to devote extensive and continuing attention to potential or real threats from China. This came particularly in response to the Chinese military buildup after the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-1996, and the accompanying stream of rhetoric and articles by Chinese strategists and other commentators pointing to China's willingness and ability to resort to various means of asymmetrical warfare in order to defeat US forces should they intervene in a Taiwan contingency. As a result, the willingness of these US government and non-government specialists to take at face value Chinese assertions that peaceful intent in 2003-2004 were balanced by their continued awareness that Chinese military forces continued to add sophisticated capabilities to PLA forces targeted at Taiwan and at US forces that would intervene in a Taiwan contingency. Without explicitly addressing China's military doctrine, force structure, and increased military capabilities, China's new peaceful approach to the United States and others was not very meaningful to these Americans. They judged it was hard for the United States to be a true partner of a country that continued to develop and expand military capabilities targeted at Americans.

China's approach toward Korea

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of East-West and Sino-Soviet competition for influence in the Korean peninsula after the cold war, Beijing adjusted Chinese relations to take advantage of economic and other opportunities with South

Korea, while sustaining its position as North Korea's most important foreign ally. The international confrontation caused by North Korea's nuclear weapons program and related ballistic missile programs, and the sharp decline in economic conditions and the rise of political uncertainty there following the sudden death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, raised uncertainties in China about the future stability of the peninsula. In general, Chinese officials used economic aid and continued military and political exchanges to help stabilize and preserve Chinese relations with the North, while working closely with South Korea and at times the United States in seeking a peaceful resolution to tensions on the peninsula. In response to the crisis created by North Korea's provocative nuclear proliferation activities during 2002-2004, China was even more active, taking the lead in international efforts to seek a diplomatic solution that would preserve China's influence and interests on the peninsula.⁴

South Korean officials along with US and other outside observers often judged that China has a longer term interest in seeing a growth of Chinese influence and a reduction of US and Japanese influence on the peninsula.⁵ However, Beijing was careful not to be seen directly challenging US leadership in Korean affairs. It apparently judged that Chinese interests were best met with a broadly accommodating posture that allowed for concurrent improvements in China's relations with South Korea and effective management of China's sometimes difficult relations with North Korea. The net result was a marked increase in China's relations with South Korea and continued Chinese relations with North Korea, closer than any other power without negatively affecting Beijing's relations with the United States. During the 2002-2004 crisis over North Korea's nuclear program, China's cooperation with the United States, South Korea, and other concerned powers in seeking a negotiated solution to the problem enhanced overall positive development in China's relations with these countries, while managing tensions over the North Korean program in ways that avoided conflict or instability on the peninsula.

Relations with South Korea

In the post cold war period, China's active interest in beneficial economic relations with South Korea continued to grow, and Chinese and South Korean leaders took a variety of initiatives to markedly improve their overall bilateral relations. Top leaders on

both sides repeatedly exchanged visits in a warm and cordial atmosphere. Both sides demonstrated similar motives in seeking increased bilateral contacts for economic reasons, to enhance their interests on the Korean peninsula, and to broaden foreign policy options. The positions of Chinese and South Korean leaders remained close in reaction to the North Korean nuclear crisis beginning in 2002. The improved relations kept in check differences that emerged over how to deal with North Korea migrants seeking refuge in China, and some trade and territorial issues.

Among other significant China-South Korean exchanges, each year well over one million South Koreans traveled as tourists to China while somewhat less than half that number of Chinese tourists visited South Korea annually. Overall South Korean visits to China in 2002 amounted to 1.7 million. Of South Koreans who traveled abroad, one quarter went to China by 2003. In 2001, South Korea for the first time received more Chinese visitors (440,000) than visitors from the United States. Chinese tourists to South Korea grew to over one half million in 2002. By 2001, over 16,000 South Koreans were studying in China. 24,000 South Koreans studied in China in 2002, and numbers as high as 40,000 were seen for 2003-2004. Also, by 2001, the number of flights between South Korea and China exceeded the number of flights between South Korea and Japan. In 2004, the number of South Korea-China flights was roughly 200 a week. The trend gained momentum as more flights leaving Seoul's new international airport went to China than to Japan.⁶

Economic and other contacts continued to go hand in hand with political contacts. Seoul played a key role in negotiating the participation of China, along with Hong Kong and Taiwan, as full members in the third meeting of the APEC forum in Seoul in November 1991. Such exchanges paved the way to China's decision to normalize diplomatic relations with South Korea despite North Korea's objections in August 1992. South Korea's President Kim Dae Jung played an important role in developing the ASEAN Plus Three multilateral forum and encouraging China's active participation in the group beginning in the late 1990s.

At the official level, with the October 2000 visit of Premier Zhu Rongji to Seoul, all seven members of the Chinese Communist Party's ruling Standing Committee had visited South Korea. Military exchanges and cooperation grew more slowly, presumably on account of China's reluctance to antagonize North Korea.

However, the South Korean defense minister visited China in August 1999 for the first ROK-PRC defense ministerial talks, the Chinese defense minister visited Seoul in January 2000, and exchanges grew in ensuing years.⁷

These remarkable developments resulted in a continuing shift of South Korean perceptions of China to one of being a benign and pragmatic economic partner.⁸ A 1996 poll conducted by the ROK government found 47 percent of South Koreans chose China as Korea's "closest partner for the year 2006" while 24 percent chose the United States. A media sponsored survey in 2000 found 52 percent of South Koreans respondents predicted China would be the most influential Asian power in ten years; few chose the United States.⁹

Korean peninsula issues

In the 1990s, closer relations with China helped to ease South Korean concerns about Beijing's possible support for North Korean aggression against the South. They also provided Seoul, via Beijing, with an indirect channel of information on and communication with North Korean leaders, who at that time generally refused to interact directly with their South Korean counterparts.¹⁰ Chinese officials viewed improved relations with South Korea as broadening China's influence on the peninsula.¹¹

Chinese officials took pains to emphasize that the improvement in China's relations with South Korea in the 1990s was not directed in any way at the United States or the U.S.-South Korean alliance relationship. Despite the fact that the Chinese government in the 1990s officially encouraged the eventual U.S. military withdrawal from East Asia and strongly criticized the strengthening of the U.S.-Japan alliance relationship, Beijing officials were moderate in response to calls in the United States and South Korea at that time for a continued U.S. military presence in Korea even after Korean reunification.¹²

China strongly supported international efforts to improve relations with Pyongyang at the time of the North-South Korean summit of 2000 and in line with South Korean President Kim Dae Jung's sunshine policy toward the North. Strong Chinese political support for inter-Korean reconciliation was welcomed by the Kim Dae Jung government at a time of difficulty in US-South Korean relations stemming from the George W. Bush administration's

harder line than the previous Clinton administration toward the North Korean regime.¹³

China's stature with the North increased in 2000-2001, notably as a result of Kim Jong Il's two visits to China and Jiang Zemin's visit to North Korea. Encouraging economic reform and increased international outreach by the North, Beijing urged the United States and others to support the asymmetrical accommodation seen in Kim Dae Jung's engagement policy and avoid confrontation and increased tensions. It did not make major issues of its differences with the United States over the Bush administration's tougher posture toward the North, though it was critical of the US's strengthening of alliances in Asia (mainly with Japan) and US missile defense plans focused on the North Korean threat.¹⁴

In the North Korean nuclear crisis of 2002-2004, rising tensions prompted by North Korea's provocative nuclear weapons development, shrill warnings, and assertive military actions combined with the firm US determination not to be "blackmailed" by Pyongyang saw Chinese officials respond to US requests to take a more active role in seeking a solution to the crisis. The Chinese government adopted a more active stance, hosted the three-party (North Korea, US and China) talks in Beijing in April 2003 and six-party talks (adding South Korea, Japan, and Russia) in Beijing in October 2003, and February 2004, and engaged in several rounds of shuttle diplomacy with the United States, North Korea and other concerned powers. Though unhappy to be excluded from the three party talks in April 2003, South Korea supported China's efforts to seek a negotiated solution. It was pleased to join in the six-party meeting, pushed by the United States, in October 2003 and February 2004.¹⁵

The international crisis of 2002-2004 caused by North Korea's provocative actions in breaking past commitments and pursuing the development of nuclear weapons saw China follow a course closer to South Korea than the United States. The Bush administration's refusal to be blackmailed by North Korea seemed to preclude significant US compromises on security and aid issues important to North Korea until a verifiable dismantling of North Korea's nuclear program was assured. The South Korean government seemed inclined to favor more US flexibility, and South Korea continued to pursue a flexible approach to North Korea under the leadership of President Roh Moo Hyun elected in

December 2002; it continued various economic and other exchanges with North Korea under the rubric of the asymmetrical normalization program set forth in Kim Dae Jung's sunshine policy. Both China and South Korea also seemed to agree that escalating diplomatic, economic or military pressure against North Korea would be counterproductive as it would increase the risk of war on the peninsula.¹⁶

Chinese officials adopted a low profile on the concurrent crisis in US-South Korean alliance relations beginning in 2002. Widespread popular resentment in South Korea of the Bush administration's hard line against North Korea, asymmetrical features of the US-South Korean alliance relationship, and strongly negative popular reaction to the accidental deaths of two South Korean youths during exercises by US troops in South Korea fed election year politics and assisted the December 2002 election of Roh Moo Hyun on an anti-US platform. Although President Roh, upon taking power in February 2003, backed away from many of his previous positions critical of US policy, strongly felt resentment against US government policies remained among many in South Korea. Commentators and strategists of this persuasion often urged that South Korea would be better off reducing its dependency on the United States and relying more strongly on Seoul's ever-closer relationship with China. By adopting a low posture on the South Korea-US controversy, Chinese officials and official Chinese commentary were careful not to be seen as seeking to take advantage of the anti-American upsurge in South Korea as a means of driving a wedge between Washington and Seoul.¹⁷

Relations with North Korea

The smooth progress and rapid development of China's relations with South Korea contrasted sharply with more difficult Chinese relations with North Korea after the cold war ended. Chinese interests in North Korea remained strong.¹⁸ The cut off of Soviet aid to North Korea and the normalization of Soviet-South Korean relations in the late 1980s, along with the demise of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, reduced Chinese concerns over Moscow's influence in North Korea. However, post cold war conditions saw North Korea pursue nuclear weapons development, leading to a major crisis with the United States and its allies. The death of Kim Il Sung in 1994 added political uncertainty to the

already unstable conditions on account of the collapse of the North Korean economy and widespread famine in the country.¹⁹

Chinese officials provided a large share of North Korea's outside food and energy supplies, but not in amounts that satisfied North Korean officials.²⁰ Chinese leaders repeatedly encouraged their North Korean counterparts to follow some of the guidelines of Chinese economic reforms and to open more to international economic contacts. North Korean officials, however, seemed reluctant to open the country significantly, presumably fearing that outside contact would undermine the regime's tight political control based on keeping North Koreans unaware of actual conditions abroad. North Korea did endeavor to carry out some domestic economic reforms and to open some restricted zones for foreign trade, tourism, and gambling. A proposed zone planned for an area next to the Chinese border in northwestern North Korea did not meet with China's approval and the Chinese government in 2002 arrested on corruption charges the China-born entrepreneur who was selected by North Korean leaders to direct the foreign economic zone.²¹

Chinese diplomacy in North Korea-South Korea-US relations, particularly regarding the crises prompted by North Korea's nuclear weapons program, emphasized preserving stability on the Korean peninsula. Chinese frustration with North Korea's nuclear weapons program and other provocations was deep and serious, particularly as North Korean actions could provoke a US attack and the spread of nuclear weapons to Japan, Taiwan and elsewhere. At the same time, Chinese leaders showed keen awareness that major instability in or collapse of the North Korean regime would have potentially major adverse consequences for China. These included the danger of full-scale war on the Korean peninsula, large-scale refugee flows to China (there already were an estimated 200,000-300,000 North Korea refugees in China in 2003), and the possible establishment of a unified Korean state under the leadership of a South Korean government that maintained a close military alliance with the United States.²²

Official Chinese actions in 2003-2004 seemed to strike a balance of support and accommodation of the North Korean regime that sought to avoid the many dangers for key Chinese interests that would follow from major instability or collapse of the North Korean regime. Chinese food aid of about one million tons a year and energy supplies of about 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil annually

continued with Chinese President Hu Jintao offering increased aid to Korean leader Kim Jong Il in order to entice North Korea to participate in the six-party talks in Beijing in October 2003.²³

In sum, China's policy continued to balance often conflicting imperatives regarding North and South Korea as it dealt with the delicate and potentially volatile situation on the peninsula. Beijing did not appear to seek big changes in the political or military status quo; it appeared intent on promoting as much stability as possible, while benefiting economically and in other ways by improving its relations with South Korea. As economic conditions in North Korea deteriorated and as the North Korean regime persisted with provocative military and other actions, Beijing officials privately worried about possible adverse consequences for China. Nonetheless, Chinese officials still saw their basic interests as well served with a policy of continued, albeit guarded, support for the North, along with improved relations with the South and close consultations with the United States over Korean issues.

The situation for China's relations with North Korea improved for a time with the unexpected breakthrough in North-South Korean relations leading to the Pyongyang summit in June 2000. This event raised hopes in China of eased tensions and peaceful accommodation on the Korean peninsula. China figured importantly in the North-South summit preparation as the site of secret North-South negotiations. Moreover, Kim Jong Il seemed to be seeking Chinese advice and support in the new approach to South Korea as he made two visits to China and Jiang Zemin visited North Korea. The overall trend in North Korean actions suggested more openness to Chinese advice and greater willingness to adopt policies of détente and reform that would reduce the danger of North-South military confrontation, promote economic revival in North Korea, and lower the chances of economic collapse and social instability, including the need for massive Chinese assistance and the large-scale flow of North Korean refugees to China.²⁴

This hopeful period ended with the impasse in North Korean-US relations following the Bush administration policy review on North Korea in 2001, the sharp rise in tensions on the peninsula posed by North Korea's provocative nuclear weapons development in 2002-2003, and signs of strong differences between North Korean-Chinese leaders over reform in North Korea's economy. China was instrumental in persuading North Korea to

participate in the three-party and six-party talks in Beijing in 2003-2004 dealing with the nuclear crisis and related issues. Chinese diplomats were careful not to take sides in the discussions, endeavoring to find common ground between the positions of North Korea, on one side, and the United States, on the other. In this regard, the Chinese positions were close to those of South Korean officials who also sought common ground and stressed the need to reduce confrontation, avoid pressure, and preserve peace. China showed its support for North Korea in welcoming Kim Jong Il who again visited China in 2004.

Well aware that dealing with North Korea involved unpredictable twists and turns perpetrated mainly by the idiosyncratic dominant leader of this isolated state, Chinese leaders by 2004 appeared resigned to a protracted effort to deal with the North Korean nuclear crisis through diplomatic means. They made known China's continued opposition to strong pressure on North Korea, reportedly warning of North Korea's using military means to lash out in response to pressure. Continued but less than sufficient Chinese food and energy assistance were among key Chinese sources of leverage with North Korean leaders, but Beijing remained hesitant to use these levers for fear of provoking a sharp North Korean response, contrary to Chinese interests of promoting stability on the peninsula. Chinese officials also worried about US actions, fearing that as the United States became impatient in the face of North Korea's continued development of nuclear weapons, it might resort to strong political, economic or military pressures. Chinese officials realized that the massive US military preoccupation trying to stabilize post-war Iraq, along with US preoccupations with the war on terrorism and other issues, made it unlikely in the short term that the United States would risk confrontation or war on the Korean peninsula by substantially increasing US pressure on North Korea. The situation remained volatile, however, with concern focused especially on the US reaction or other international fallout from such possible North Korean steps as a nuclear weapons test, a ballistic missile test seemingly targeted against Japan or US forces in Japan, or North Korean nuclear weapons cooperation with international terrorists.²⁵

Foreign policy concerns and implications for the United States

South Korean motives for good relations with China often included foreign policy concerns. At times in the 1990s and later,

South Korean officials viewed better relations with China as a useful way to preclude possible Chinese expansion or pressure against South Korea as China grew in wealth and power during the twenty-first century. They also saw good relations with China as providing protection against possible pressure from Japan against South Korea in the future.²⁶ Officials in Seoul were careful to add that relations with China also broadened South Korean foreign policy options, allowing South Korea to appear to break out of the constraints imposed by what they saw as a U.S.-centered foreign policy since the 1950s. South Korean opinion leaders judged that with better relations with China, Seoul could afford to be more assertive and less accommodating in relations with the United States.²⁷ Meanwhile, South Korean officials also asserted that South Korea wanted to avoid a situation where it might have to choose between Washington and Beijing, if U.S.-Chinese tensions in Asia were to rise sharply.

According to South Korean experts, China viewed good relations with Seoul as a possible hedge against Japanese power, and Chinese intentions were said by some South Korean experts to reflect a desire to use better relations with South Korea against possible U.S. efforts to "contain" or hold back China's growing power and influence in Asian and world affairs. In particular, Chinese specialists and officials voiced concern from time to time that the United States might use its alliance relationships with Japan and South Korea in order to check or build a barrier against the allegedly expanding "China threat" in northeast Asia. Closer China-South Korean relations would complicate any such U.S. strategic scheme.²⁸

In this context, South Korea and China markedly increased cooperation in Asian regional groups.²⁹ China's greater willingness in the 1990s and early of 21st Century to cooperate more closely with and play a more active role in Asian multilateral organizations assisted this trend. Previously, Chinese officials had viewed Asian multilateral groups with more wariness and skepticism. Thus, China's greater willingness to cooperate with South Korea and others in the economic deliberations of APEC and in the security related interchanges in the ARF enhanced China-South Korean relations.

The two powers also participated actively in regional forums that excluded the United States. The biannual Asia- Europe (ASEM) meetings initiated in 1996 saw both South Korea and

China play significant roles in this body that encouraged greater cooperation between East Asia and the developed countries of Europe, in part as a counterweight to the US-led APEC. The Asian economic crisis of 1997 prompted stronger regional cooperation efforts led by South Korea and China under the ASEAN Plus Three rubric. This group, including the ten ASEAN states plus Japan along with China and South Korea, became the paramount regional grouping in East Asia, with frequent meetings of senior ministers and state leaders that occasioned major economic and some political and security initiatives, notably proposals by China, South Korea, Japan and others for free trade agreements in the region and security plans dealing with East Asia.

These actions reflected strong interest in China and South Korea in deepening intraregional cooperation, first in economic areas but then in political and security areas, in order to ease longstanding mutual suspicions among East Asian states and enhance prospects for peace and development in the region. China's public stance focused on its New Security Concept announced in 1997, a reworking of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence that were the mainstay of moderate and accommodating phases in Chinese foreign policy for 50 years. The NSC was well received in South Korea and, along with other Chinese policies and behavior, provided vague but sufficient basis for many in South Korea and elsewhere in Asia to deal with China's rising power and influence in constructive ways.

When the NSC was initially proposed, Chinese foreign policy strongly competed with the United States and Chinese officials repeatedly used the NSC to counter the US-favored alliance structure in Asian and world affairs. Following the moderate turn in China's public posture toward the United States in 2001, Chinese officials and thinking generally avoided calling on South Korean or other Asians to choose between China's NSC and the "cold war thinking" and "power politics" exemplified by the US insistence on maintaining and strengthening US-led alliance structures in Asia and elsewhere. This more positive Chinese approach, which Chinese officials said would lead to a "win-win" situation in Asia for all concerned powers including the United States as well as South Korea and China, was well received in South Korea and helped to strengthen Sino-South Korean relations.

Consultations in South Korea during May and June 2004 with South Korean government officials concerned with China, and

South Korean academic and other specialists who dealt with Chinese affairs, underlined the increasingly positive assessment in South Korea of China's approach toward the Korean peninsula.³⁰ Beijing's recent emphasis on China's "peaceful rise" in Asia was warmly welcomed. South Korean government officials pointed to the discussion of South Korean-Chinese relations in the May 2004 National Security Strategy of the Republic of Korea entitled *Peace, Prosperity, and National Security*.³¹ The section of the document dealing with South Korean-Chinese relations was full of positive statements. It highlighted the July 2003 summit between President Roh Moo-Hyun and Hu Jintao, which upgraded the bilateral relationship to a "comprehensive cooperative partnership." South Korean officials welcomed consolidated relations with China as providing a "firm foundation" for regional cooperation and peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia.

Assessing the very positive trends in bilateral political, economic, military and other relations, the summit's joint statement on July 8, 2003, pledged to increase the already very active exchanges of personnel and political party leaders, to see South Korea play an important role in China's efforts to develop Western China, and to seek a bilateral trade volume of \$100 billion by 2008. Both sides also pledged to expand military exchanges and enhance transparency in military policies.³²

In the view of South Korean officials in mid 2004, South Korea and China also seemed to have a common general interest in multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia and elsewhere. South Korean government officials noted that they would work hard to promote cooperation with China and others in the United Nations and ASEAN Plus Three, and that South Korea would seek to work with China to develop a multilateral security dialogue in Northeast Asia and Asia more broadly.

South Korean officials judged that China would continue to play a critically important role in promoting dialogue for the peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue, and they pledged to work closely with China to speed up the process seen in the six-party talks. China's role in other aspects of inter-Korean cooperation also was seen as centrally important, from the vantage point of South Korean officials.

South Korean government officials and non-government specialists believed that China's emphasis in 2003-2004 on China's peaceful rise reflected a long-term trend of moderate Chinese

behavior in Asian and world affairs. In their view, Chinese leaders were too preoccupied with internal issues and difficulties to consider a more assertive or disruptive posture in Asia. China was seen as being in no position to confront the United States, and Chinese leaders were seen by the South Korean officials and specialists as eager to avoid confrontation with American power. This overall situation was seen as likely to persist for many years.

South Korean government officials privately were concerned in mid 2004 about what they saw as a “China fever” among large portions of the South Korean people and among many of the recently elected legislators in South Korea’s National Assembly. China was becoming more popular among these important groups at a time when tensions in the US-South Korean alliance relationship continued as a result of a variety of bilateral and other issues. The salient issues in US-South Korean alliance relations in mid 2004 had to do with reaching agreement on deployment and reduction of US forces in South Korea in line with an altered US global military strategy that allowed for stationing fewer US soldiers overseas, and using those soldiers flexibly, in response to a variety of possible contingencies. The United States notably made a decision to remove a combat brigade from South Korea and send it to Iraq in mid 2004, and was said to be unlikely to replace the brigade in South Korea.³³

South Korean government officials privately said they continued to believe that the United States was far more important for South Korea than was China, and they were concerned to preserve a healthy alliance relationship with the United States despite repeated crises and differences in recent years. Nonetheless, they said they faced a difficult challenge in achieving these tasks in the face of widespread South Korean public opinion, and the opinion of recently elected legislators, that gave China the top priority in South Korean foreign policy and took a dim view of the United States and the US-South Korean alliance. In this context, some officials cited recent polls that showed that among the members of the National Assembly elected in April 2004, 63 percent saw China as most important for South Korean interests and only 26 percent saw the United States as most important. The officials said this was similar to other polling dealing with popular South Korean views of the United States and China.³⁴

South Korean government officials and some non-government South Korean specialists also emphasized in 2004 that

South Korea more than ever did not want to be in a position of having to choose between the United States and China. On the one hand, they wanted to preserve and enhance the alliance with the United States. Some averred that the alliance was an important reason China treated South Korea in a very friendly manner. Without the alliance, they judged China would have less incentive to be so accommodating of South Korean interests and concerns. There was a good deal of publicity in South Korea about the cultural and historical affinities that prompted many in South Korea to see closer alignment with China as a natural and comfortable stance for South Korea. South Korean government officials nonetheless said that they were less sanguine that such an alignment within China’s “sphere of influence” would be good for South Korea, especially without the counterweight of the South Korean alliance with the United States. On the other hand, South Korean officials also acknowledged that there were some South Korean officials who sought to use improved South Korean relations with China as a means to prompt the United States to be more accommodating and forthcoming regarding South Korean issues and concerns.

Reflecting angst by South Korea government officials to preserve the alliance with the United States while improving relations with China, the officials emphasized that the US-Republic of Korea alliance should allow for positive US and South Korean relations with China and should avoid friction with China. Against this background, South Korean officials noted Seoul’s unwillingness to follow the United States in pursuing policies that China opposed, including US efforts to criticize China’s human rights practices, US development of ballistic missile defenses, and most importantly, US support for Taiwan. It was broadly held among South Korean and US observers in Seoul that one of the main reasons South Korea was reluctant to agree to allow US forces in South Korea to be deployed to other areas was that those forces might be deployed to the Taiwan area in the event of a US-China military confrontation in the Taiwan Strait. Some officials said such a deployment would meet very strong South Korean opposition and would prompt a major crisis in the US-South Korean alliance.³⁵

Some South Korean officials tried to put the upsurge in positive South Korean attention to China in 2004 in a more balanced context. They judged that the burgeoning economic ties, China’s central role in dealing with North Korea, and the very

attentive and accommodating Chinese political approach toward South Korea were major reasons the recent positive trend would continue. China “respects” South Korean pride, they said, noting how important this was for China’s good public image in South Korea. At the same time, the officials saw serious issues in China-South Korean relations and advised that South Korean opinion was volatile and could turn against China if a sensitive issue were to emerge. They cited Chinese-Korean differences over the historical range of China and Korean states—a recently prominent dispute among Chinese and Korean historians that had some possible bearing of current territorial claims of the respective governments. Trade issues emerged along with rising trade and prompted anger by some in South Korea. Some South Korean officials claimed that China’s handling of the six-party talks belittled the South Korean role; were this to become widely known, they said, Chinese-South Korean tensions would rise. The Chinese position on North Korea also was seen as at odds with South Korea, especially in the sense that China was seen wanting to preserve the North Korean state as a buffer while Seoul sought reunification.³⁶

In sum, the broad upswing in China-South Korean relations seemed likely to continue. Chinese officials continued to adopt a low profile on issues in US-South Korean alliance relations, except where they involved North Korea or possibly Taiwan. Thus, China complained that US efforts aimed at applying pressure on North Korea through joint military exercises with South Korea, and they also complained about the US-backed Proliferation Security Initiative that was seen to target North Korea. They were said by South Korean and US officials to have made inquiries about how the possible deployment of US forces from South Korea might affect Chinese interests, notably concerning a possible Taiwan contingency.

China’s discretion was consistent with its overall positive posture toward South Korea that was attentive to South Korean sensibilities and pride. China’s approach did not confront the United States interests in South Korea directly, but clearly provided a counterpoint for South Korean elite and popular opinion at times of difficulties in US-South Korean alliance relations. Some observers in Seoul in mid-2004 judged that the United States was not in a good position to improve relations with South Korea and that China as a result would loom even more important in South Korea’s future. They noted that while President Roh had moved away from

anti-US positions since his election in December 2002, the new legislature and the President’s administration were seen as looking with disfavor at US efforts to downsize US forces in South Korea and to use those forces in other areas. Goodwill on both the South Korean and US side had become frayed as a result of many crises and tensions, especially since 2002. Several officials on the US side seemed tired of changing and seemingly unreasonable South Korean demands, and a similar “fatigue factor” was also seen by some as taking hold on the part of South Korean officials. If the recent trends were to continue, China’s influence in South Korea could rise to a level where it was indeed the leading partner of South Korea, with the United States relegated to a lower overall position in South Korean thinking. The key variable determining this outcome was more US and South Korean policies and behavior than Chinese policies and behavior.

In conclusion, over the next year or two, the Chinese emphasis on a peaceful rise seems generally advantageous for the United States on the Korean peninsula. It continues to reduce important areas of friction with a major power at a time when the US administration seeks broader international support as it deals with protracted international problems, notably the problems in Iraq and other parts of Southwest Asia. The Bush administration by 2003 confronted a variety of charges from European, Middle Eastern, and other governments about US “hegemonism” and power politics in Iraq and elsewhere; but China, a previous leader in the campaign against US domination and hegemony, chose this time to curb invective and avoid sharp criticism—an important “bright spot” for Bush administration diplomacy.³⁷

Indeed, the US government saw common ground with China as it endeavored to deal with North Korea’s provocative nuclear weapons development and the crisis this caused in 2002-2004. The facilitator of multilateral talks on this issue and the main international power capable of exerting pressure to constrain North Korean provocative behavior, China became a key partner of the United States in managing tensions on the peninsula and working to deal with the nuclear issue through negotiations. The Bush administration entered office with little inclination to rely on China to deal with North Korea, choosing instead to work with allies and rely on US strength. But Chinese support continues to be very important at a time when US strength is diverted to Southwest Asia and the Middle East, and US allies, notably South Korea, are in the

midst of political and foreign policy realignments that make South Korean policy diverge in often unpredictable ways from US interests on the peninsula.

Over the longer term, China's approach and recent negative trends in US-South Korean alliance relations pose major concerns for the United States. While careful not to confront the United States directly or to explicitly exacerbate US-South Korean tensions, China's markedly improved relations with South Korea help to insure that Seoul will be a reluctant participant at best in any possible US-led effort to pressure or constrain China, and that US ability to establish a future order on the Korean peninsula contrary to Chinese interests also will be curbed. The possibility that South Korea will rebuff the United States and seek close alignment with China appears to grow with each positive step in South Korean-Chinese relations and with each concurrent negative development in US-South Korean ties.

¹ The speech is available at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/zxxx/t55972.htm>. See also Zheng Bijian, "New path for China's 'peaceful rise,'" (Shanghai) *Wen Hui Bao* March 21, 2004 (internet version). Zheng Bijian, "Globalization and the emergence of China," opening remarks at a conference hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C. November 13, 2003.

² This assessment is based heavily on consultations with Chinese officials and specialists carried out in 2004, notably during a research trip to Beijing and Shanghai in May 2004.

³ US-China Security Review Commission, *Report to Congress*, July 2002 <http://www.uscc.gov/anrp02.htm> (relevant sections). US Department of Defense, *Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China*, 2003. <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/20030730chinaex.pdf>

⁴ Samuel Kim, "The making of China's Korea policy in the era of reform," in David M. Lampton ed., *The making of Chinese foreign and security policy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, pp. 371-408. David Shambaugh, "China and the Korean Peninsula," *Washington Quarterly* 26:2 (spring 2003), pp. 43-56. Denny Roy, *China and the Korean Peninsula*, Honolulu: Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, Vol 3, No. 1, January 2004. Jae Ho Chung, "From a special relationship to a normal partnership?" *Pacific Affairs* 76:3, pp. 549-568. You Ji, "Understanding China's North Korea Policy," (Jamestown Foundation) *China Brief*, March 3, 2004. Ming Liu, "China and the

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⁵ Taeho Kim, "China's Evolving Bilateral Ties in Northeast Asia," in Jaushieh Joseph Wu ed., *Rising China*, Taipei: Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University, 2001, pp. 205-206. Denny Roy, *China and the Korean Peninsula*, Honolulu: Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, Vol 3, No. 1, January 2004. Fei-ling Wang, *Tacit acceptance and watchful eyes: Beijing's views about the US-ROK alliance*, Carlisle PA: US Army War College, 1997.

⁶ Scott Snyder, "Transit, Traffic Control and Telecoms," *Comparative Connections*, April 2002. Consultations Washington, D.C., March 2004.

⁷ Scott Snyder, "Consummating 'full-scale cooperative partnership'" *Comparative Connections*, January 2001. Scott Snyder, "upgrading communication channels, messages are getting clearer," *Comparative Connections*, April 2000.

⁸ Taeho Kim, "China's Evolving Bilateral Ties in Northeast Asia," in Jaushieh Joseph Wu ed., *Rising China*, Taipei: Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University, 2001, pp. 205-206.

⁹ Samuel Kim, "Chinese-North Korean relations at a cross-roads," *op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹⁰ *Korea: Improved South Korean-Chinese Relations*, Washington DC: The Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, Report 97-681F, July 1997, p.2.

¹¹ *Korea: US-South Korean Relations*, Washington DC: The Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, Issue Brief 98045, December 15, 2003. Robert Sutter, *Chinese policy priorities and their implications for the United States*, Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000, p. 99.

¹² Sutter, *Chinese policy priorities*, p. 101. Bonnie Glaser and Ronald Montaperto, "Northeast Asia interviews with Chinese defense officials," in Han Binnendijk and Ronald Montaperto eds, *Strategic Trends in China*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 1998, pp. 111-112.

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- ¹⁴ Scott Snyder, "Economic interests uber alles," *Comparative Connections*, July 2001.
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- ²⁰ Samuel Kim, "Chinese-North Korean relations at a cross-roads," *International Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol VII, No. 1 (Spring-Summer 2003), p. 44.
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- ³² Reported in *Peace, Prosperity, and National Security* Seoul: National Security Council, Republic of Korea, May 1, 2004 p. 62.
- ³³ Consultations with US and South Korean officials, May 31, June 1, 2004.
- ³⁴ Consultations with South Korean officials, May-June 2004.
- ³⁵ Consultations, Seoul, May 31, 2004.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ Kerry Dumbaugh, *China-US relations: current issues for the 108th Congress*, Washington: The Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, Report RL 31815, May 25, 2004.