

**Changing South Korean Public Opinion on the US  
and the ROK- US Alliance**

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## **I. ROK-US Alliance at the Crossroads**

During the last half century, the ROK-US alliance has been considered a great success. The alliance has served as an effective security framework to deter North Korean aggression. In addition, it has helped to create a stable environment for economic dynamism and democratic consolidation within South Korea. Yet, the alliance now lie at the crossroads. The change in the global and regional strategic environment in Northeast Asia, the increasing perception gap between the United States and South Korea about threats from North Korea, and policy divergence between the two governments have produced tension, fissure, and mutual distrust between the two allies. Therefore, there are mounting doubts and pessimism about the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance. At a recent academic conference, Cato Institute researcher Doug Bandow said the U.S. has no vital interests in Korea that justify huge costs and sacrifice, and that the two nations need to prepare for divorce (Bandow, 2005).

There have been many signs of rift in the recent bilateral relations. Last March, President Roh Moo-hyun announced that South Korea needs to play the role of “balancer” in Northeast Asia. Even though the Korean government argues that a regional balancer role is based on a strong Korea-U.S. alliance, critics argue that Roh’s stance is shaking the half-century old alliance and that Seoul may be giving the impression it will weaken ties with Washington and maintain a neutral position with Washington or Beijing on regional issues.<sup>1</sup> In early April, USFK announced that it will cut up to 1,000 jobs of South Korean employees at U.S. military bases and might withdraw some combat equipment from the peninsula because of reduced financial support from South Korea.

Moreover, a significant erosion of public support for the alliance is considered to further create obstacles for the alliance. The recent wave of anti-Americanism in South Korea has produced a rift in the ROK-U.S. alliance.<sup>2</sup> Anti-Americanism in Korea has suddenly gained visibility since the ‘candle light protests’ of November and December 2002 in Seoul. The surge of anti-Americanism in December 2002 was qualitatively different in size and duration from previous incidents that manifested the anti-American sentiment. It was by far, the largest anti-American demonstration ever to be held in South Korea. As anti-Americanism was on the increase in South Korea, tensions were also rising on the Korean peninsula mainly because North Korea declared it would renew its nuclear weapons program. In the past, there had been a general pattern of increased public support for the ROK-U.S. alliance whenever a threat to national security arose. In December 2002, anti-Americanism continued to grow regardless of

the nuclear standoff with North Korea.

Many journalists, both in South Korea and the United States, reported that rising anti-Americanism despite increasing security threats from North Korea inflicted major damage on the ROK-U.S. alliance. They argued that anti-Americanism in South Korea reflect a negative image of South Korea to the American public and U.S. government, and could lead to negative consequences such as the withdrawal of the USFK.<sup>3</sup>

In winter 2002, anti-Americanism in South Korea was expected to remain for a long time as a source of conflict within Korean society, and pose as an obstacle to ROK-U.S. relations. However, the opinion polls from June 2003 to July 2004 show that anti-Americanism in South Korea has substantially waned. The results showed that public opinion on the ROK-U.S. alliance and USFK reversed from negative to positive and a favorable perception on the U.S. and the ROK-U.S alliance arose among the Korean public.

The main aim of this paper is to examine the changes in public attitude and perception towards the U.S. over the past two years. The empirical data used for the paper are based on polls conducted jointly by the East Asia Institute and the Joong-Ang Daily, Hankook Daily, and Chicago Council of Foreign Relations in December 2002, June 2003, February 2004, and July 2004. Conducted four times with an approximate six-month interval using a similar questionnaire, the opinion poll outcomes are useful in discerning the changes in public attitude towards ROK-U.S. relations.

### **III. CHANGING ATTITUDE OF THE KOREAN PUBLIC TOWARDS THE UNITED STATES**

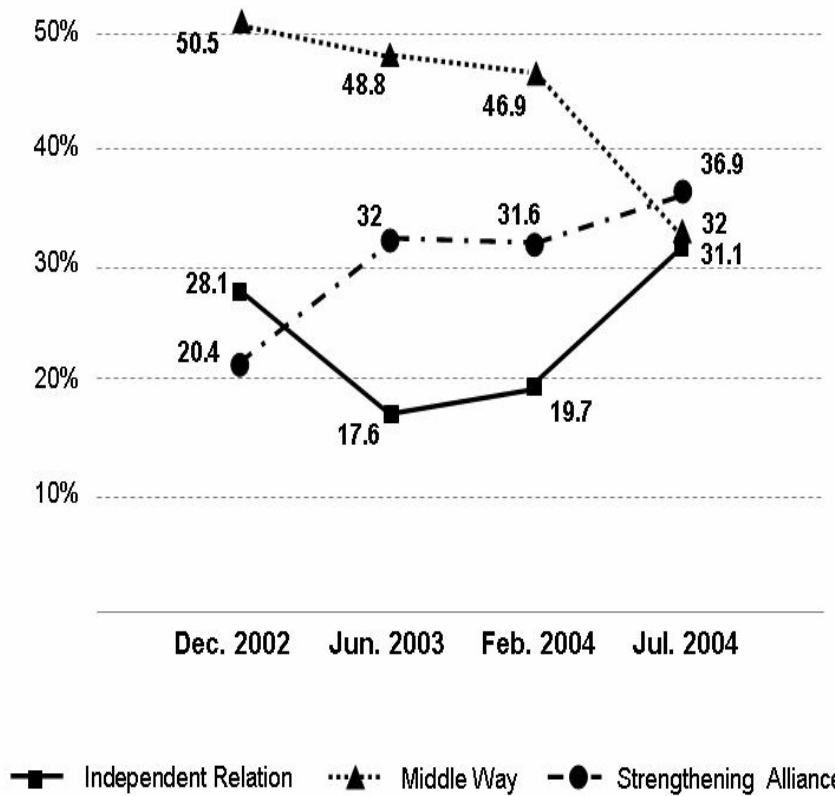
#### ***Waning Anti-Americanism***

To examine whether the recent rise of anti-Americanism threatened the legitimacy of the ROK-U.S. alliance, we should first look at the public view on issues closely linked to the alliance between South Korea and the U.S., and gauge public opinion about the role of USFK, desired ROK-U.S. relations, and Washington's policy towards North Korea

First, let us look at the changing attitude on ROK-U.S relations as shown in <Figure 1>. When asked what would be a desirable ROK-U.S. alliance in the December 2002 survey, 20.4 percent supported a stronger alliance and 50.5 percent took the middle-road position of maintaining the current alliance. The remaining 28.1 percent

called for national defense autonomy. It is likely that those who called for national defense autonomy tend to be discontent with the ROK-U.S alliance. In June 2003, however, there was a sharp rise in support for a stronger alliance with the U.S. from 20.4 to 32 percent while those calling for national defense autonomy dropped from 28.1 to 17.6 percent. This indicates that there has been a significant shift to a favorable attitude toward the U.S. In the July 2004 survey, support for a stronger alliance with the U.S. reached 36.9 percent and the portion of favoring national defense autonomy also reached 31.1 percent. These results indicate the trend of polarized public opinion concerning the ROK-US alliance in South Korea.

**Figure 1: Changing Attitude of Korean Public on the ROK-US Alliance(%)**



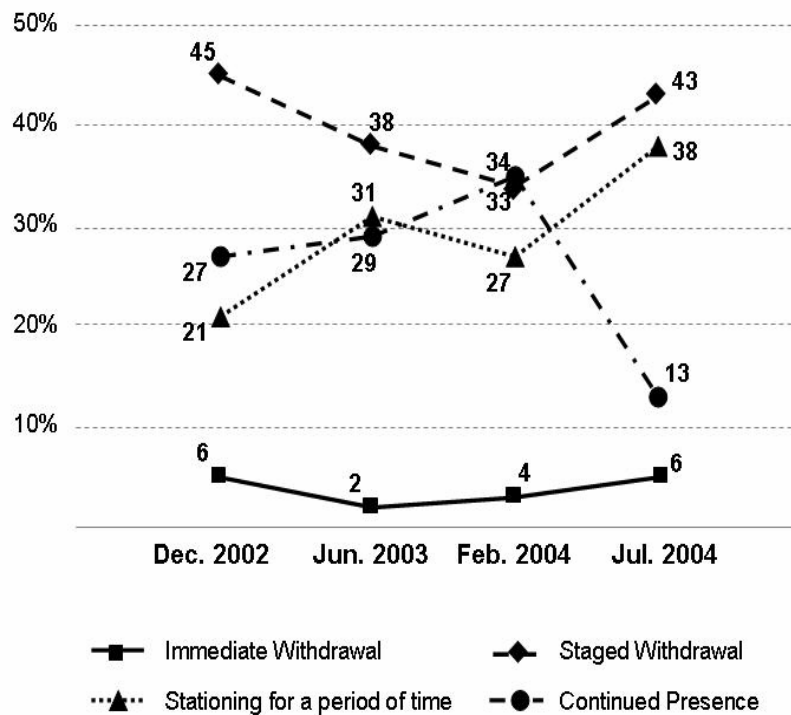
Source: EAI and Joong-Ang Ilbo(2002, 2003), EAI ad Hankook Ilbo(Feb. 2004), and EAI-CCFR-CIDE-COMEXI(Jul. 2004)

The increase of favorable attitude toward the U.S. is also observed from the

changing perception on USFK. <Figure 2> shows the changing attitude of the Korean public towards USFK. In the December 2002 poll, support for “immediate withdrawal” (6.3%) and for “staged withdrawal” (44.6%) of USFK were higher than support for “continued presence” (27%) and “extended presence” (21%). Considering that USFK was the major deterrence to security threats from North Korea during the last half century, this survey result was very alarming. This showed an overall discontent with the ROK-U.S. alliance and a possibility that rising anti-American sentiments may undermine the legitimacy of the ROK-U.S alliance.

In the February 2004 survey, however, support for “immediate withdrawal” and for “staged withdrawal” of USFK dropped from 6.3 to 3.8 percent and from 44.6 to 33.1 percent, respectively. In turn, the proportion of those in favor of “extended presence” and “continued presence” increased from 21 to 27.1 percent and 27 to 34.3 percent, respectively. This indicates that the level of discontent with USFK sharply decreased and favorable attitudes toward USFK increased substantially. In the July 2004 survey, support for “staged withdrawal” and for “extended presence” increased, while support for “continued presence” dropped significantly.

**Figure 2: Changing Attitude of Korean Public on USFK(%)**

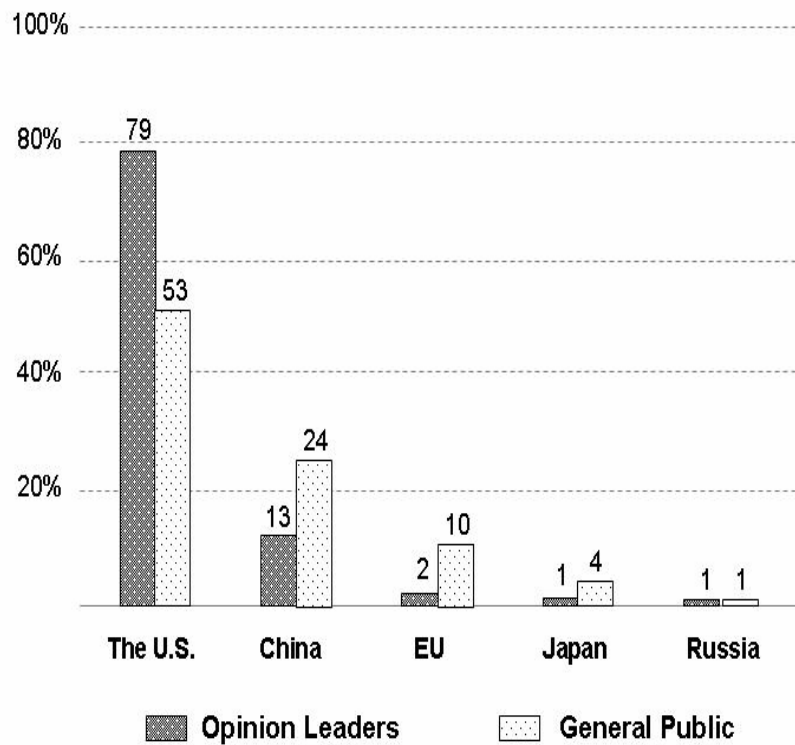


Source: EAI and Joong-Ang Ilbo(2002, 2003), EAI ad Hankook Ilbo(Feb. 2004), and

***Increasing Support for the ROK-U.S. Alliance***

Along with the waning anti-American sentiment, a recent trend of South Korean public opinion is the increase in support for the ROK-U.S. alliance. The July 2004 survey results clearly indicate the increasing recognition of strategic importance of the US by the Korean public as shown in <Figure 3>. The United States was chosen as the best strategic partner by 51 percent of the Korean public. In addition, 79 percent of opinion leaders regarded the United States as the most crucial partner. It is notable that 24% of general public and 13% of opinion leaders regarded China as the best partner. This indicates that most Koreans recognize the strategic importance of the US for South Korea and that China is far behind the United States as the best partner.

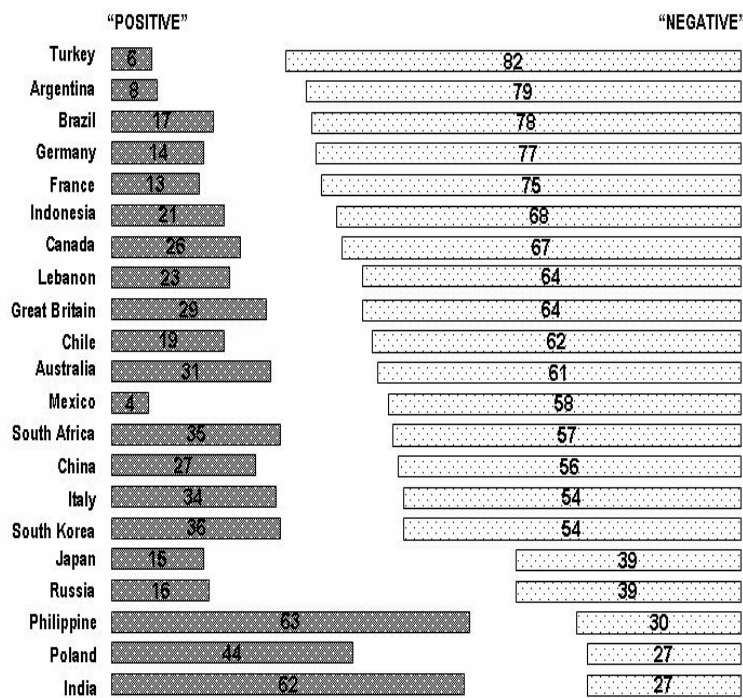
**Figure 3: The Country with which South Korea should Cooperate the most(%)**



Source: EAI-CCFR-CIDE-COMEXI (July 2004)

December 2004 GlobeScan poll that compared attitudes toward Bush’s re-election in 22 countries again highlights the changing attitude of South Korean public toward the United States. While negative attitude toward Bush’s re-election is a worldwide phenomenon, it is clear that the South Korean public had a relatively positive stance among the 22 countries. Interestingly enough, the attitude of South Korean public is more positive than that of Britain and most of EU countries. This survey result suggests that the level of anti-American sentiment in South Korea is relatively low and has been exaggerated by mainstream media both in South Korea and in the US.

**Figure 4: Attitude toward Bush Re-election(%)**



Source: GlobeScan Poll(Dec. 2004). The empty space in this chart represents “depends/neither” and “DK/NA.”

In short, the majority of the Korean public is very cautious about dismantling the traditional ROK-U.S. alliance. They have a sense of hesitation or apprehension toward the fundamental rupture of Korea-U.S. relations. Survey results show that the recent

surge of anti-American sentiment in South Korea has not posed any real threat to the alliance between Seoul and Washington. With more than 70 percent of the population favoring maintenance or strengthening of the alliance, it would be difficult to characterize the anti-Americanism in South Korea as challenging the legitimacy of the alliance.

***Divided Public Opinion on the United States***

Despite the recent trend of increasing support for the ROK-U.S. alliance, a potentially serious threat to the ROK-U.S. alliance was the sharp polarization of public attitude toward the U.S. based on age groups, ideological orientations and support for political parties. <Table 1> shows the results of cross-tabulation of public view on the desirable ROK-U.S. relations by age groups, ideological orientation, and party preference. First, there was a sharp disparity of views on the desirable US-Korea alliance among different age groups. The preference for national defense autonomy was stronger among younger age groups, while those aged fifty and above showed a preference for a stronger ROK-U.S. alliance. In addition, we can discern a significant division of attitudes towards the U.S by ideological orientations and party preferences.

<b>Table 1: Attitude on Desirable South Korea-U.S. Relations</b>					
		<b>Desirable S. Korea-U.S. Relations</b>			
		<b>National Defense Autonomy</b>	<b>Status Quo</b>	<b>Strengthened Alliance</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>By Age</b> N=120	<b>20s</b>	28.7%	51.3%	20.0%	100.0%
	<b>30s</b>	26.5%	53.4%	20.1%	100.0%
	<b>40s</b>	25.3%	52.9%	21.8%	100.0%
	<b>More than 50</b>	13.2%	56.8%	30.1%	100.0%
<b>By Ideology</b> N=1008	<b>Liberal</b>	34.0%	43.8%	22.2%	100.0%
	<b>Neutral</b>	23.9%	56.9%	19.1%	100.0%
	<b>Conservative</b>	13.7%	52.7%	33.6%	100.0%
<b>By Party Preference</b>	<b>Uri Party</b>	24.1%	56.7%	19.2%	100.0%
	<b>Grand National Party</b>	15.0%	56.3%	28.7%	100.0%



<b>N=723</b>	<b>Democratic Party</b>	36.4%	41.5%	22.0%	100.0%
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Source: EAI-CCFR-CIDE-COMEXI (July 2004)

This result indicates that there are two conflicting perceptions regarding the United States among the Korean public. While some Koreans perceive the United States as a reliable ally to guarantee national security, others hold an opposing view that the United States is an impediment to the rapprochement between Seoul and Pyongyang. The divided perceptions on the United States seem to be closely related to the conflicting views towards North Korea. The two conflicting attitudes towards North Korea are enthusiasm towards North Korea as a partner for rapprochement and reunification, and lingering mistrust of North Korea as an enemy.<sup>4</sup>

The polarization of public opinion on security issues, such as the policy towards North Korea and the ROK-U.S. relations, has been the key cause of ideological conflict in South Korea and a major obstacle in gaining the national consensus required for promoting government's policy on North Korea and the ROK-U.S. relations. The conflict is likely to continue to plague South Korea for a long time.<sup>5</sup>

Divided public attitudes on security issues are most salient among different age groups. As for the reasons for the anti-American sentiment among the young generation, a number of explanations can be suggested. Firstly, because the young generation did not experience the Korean War and thus have a weak sense of threat from North Korea, they tend to downplay the role of the ROK-U.S. alliance as a deterrent against North Korean threat. Secondly, because the young generation constitutes the largest proportion of the Internet users and since Korean Internet media tend to have a progressive orientation, the young generation tends to harbor relatively strong anti-American sentiments. Finally, President Roh Moo-hyun, who called for equal partnership in Korea-U.S. relations in his dramatic presidential campaign and had received dominant support from the young people, may have fueled anti-American sentiments among the young generation.<sup>6</sup>

### **III. Perception of North Korean Threat and the Perception Gap between the United States and South Korea**

#### **Perception of North Korean Threat**

A key element of maintaining strong alliance is that allies should have the similar

level of threat perceptions regarding their common enemies (Snyder, 1997). Many experts argue that perceptions on North Korea in the United States and South Korea have shifted apart substantially in the past few years and have posed as major obstacles for alliance coordination.

The threat perception gap between the United States and South Korea can be analyzed at two different levels: the government level and public level. At the government level, the perceptions of President and high-rank officials in charge of security policy making are critical. It is no doubt that the perception of the two governments about North Korea has been divergent in recent years and this perception gap has been the main source of tension and rift in the US-ROK alliance. In fact, different approaches from Seoul and Washington concerning the North Korean nuclear arms program seem to result from their sharply differing perceptions about North Korea. President Roh regards North Korea as a partner in negotiations rather than an adversary. His view is in sharp contrast with that of U.S. President George W. Bush, who has branded North Korea as part of the "axis of evil."

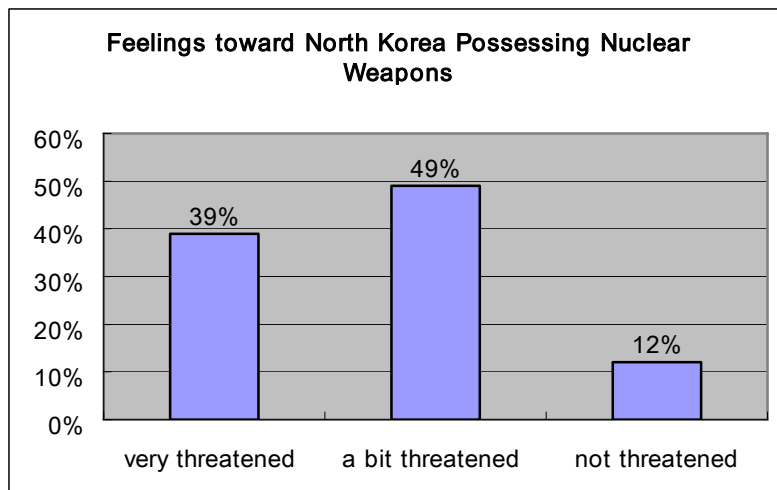
Some experts argue that the perception of South Korean public on the threat posed by North Korea has changed significantly in the last decade and that it has become a greater challenge to the US-ROK alliance (Armacost, 2004; Snyder, 2004). It is no question that the sunshine policy pursued by Kim Dae-Jung government has diminished South Korean fear of North Korea. Moreover, the inter-Korean summit held on 15 June of 2000 clearly had a deep emotional and psychological impact on the Korean views of North Korea. There has been public euphoria over a thawing of the inter-Korean relationship since the summit.

Therefore, changing perceptions of the threat posed by the North combined with increasing national self-confidence in South Korea has created a nationalistic and optimistic expectation about rapprochement and cooperation between the two Koreas. As a result, some South Koreans have a naïve view that North Korea would never use nuclear weapons against its South Korean compatriot and thus the United States is a bigger threat to South Korea than North Korea.

In recent years, however, critical views of the sunshine policy have increased among many Koreans. Not much progress has been observed in inter-Korean relations despite economic and humanitarian aid to the North by the South Korean government and various NGOs. Moreover, the renewal of the nuclear arms program by North Korea since 2002 created a sense of betrayal against the North among South Koreans. As anti-Americanism has fluctuated substantially in the last three years, we can expect that the Korean public's perception on North Korea may change significantly.

The July 2004 survey results show the current perception of South Korean public about North Korea. To the question, “Do you think North Korea has nuclear weapons?,” 75 percent of Korean public answered “yes” and the remaining 25 percent answered “no”. In addition, as shown in <Figure 5>, 88% of Korean public would feel threatened if North Korea has nuclear weapons. This survey result indicates that the Korean public has a high level of threat perception about the North Korean nuclear program.

**Figure 5: Feelings toward North Korea Possessing Nuclear Weapons among the Korean Public**

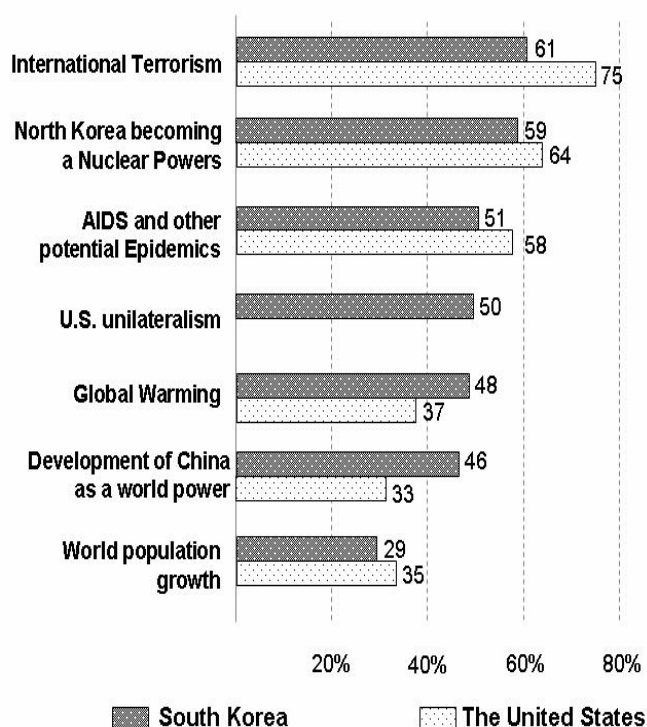


Source: EAI-CCFR-CIDE-COMEXI (July 2004)

<Figure> 6 shows that both South Korean and American public share common threat perceptions. International terrorism and the North Korean nuclear program are selected as two major critical threats to the national interests of both countries in the next 10 years.<sup>7</sup> Although the level of threat perceptions about terrorism and North Korean nuclear program is higher among American public than among Koreans, it is no question that South Koreans and Americans share the threat perception about terrorism and the North Korean nuclear program. However, it is interesting that 50 percent of the Korean public regard U.S. unilateralism as a critical threat to the national interest of South Korea. This result indicates that many Koreans are concerned that US unilateral military action against North Korea might lead to a major military conflict in the Korean peninsula. It is also notable that the percentage of South Koreans viewing the

development of China as a world power as critical threat is higher (46%) than that of the American public (33%). This result is in contrast with the common concern that many Koreans have considered China as a future strategic partner.

**Figure 6.: Critical Threats to the Vital Interest in the next 10 Years(%)**



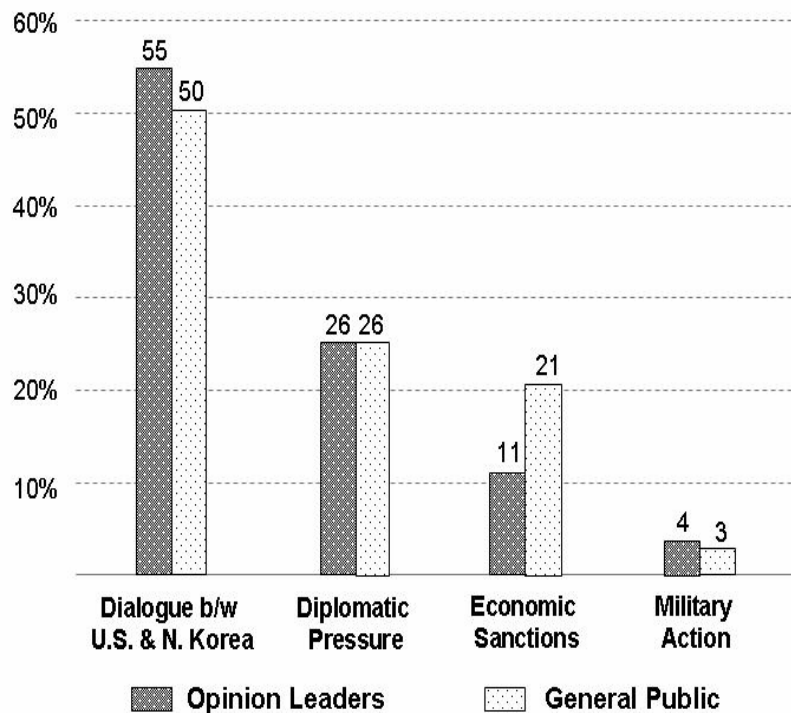
Source: EAI-CCFR-CIDE-COMEXI (July 2004)

### **Differing Views of the Deterrence Strategy**

While both the Korean and American public share common threat perceptions of North Korea, there is a clear difference in how to resolve the North Korean nuclear program. As shown in <Figure 7>, the majority of the Korean public as well as opinion leaders favor the strategy of dialogue and negotiation between the US and North Korea. Preference for diplomatic pressure is 26% and support for economic sanction is 11% among opinion leaders and 21% among public. It is noticeable that only a tiny portion

of opinion leaders (5%) and the general public (3%) advocate military action against North Korea to resolve the nuclear crisis.

**Figure 7: South Korean Opinion on Proper Strategy in Resolving the North Korean Nuclear Arms Program (%)**

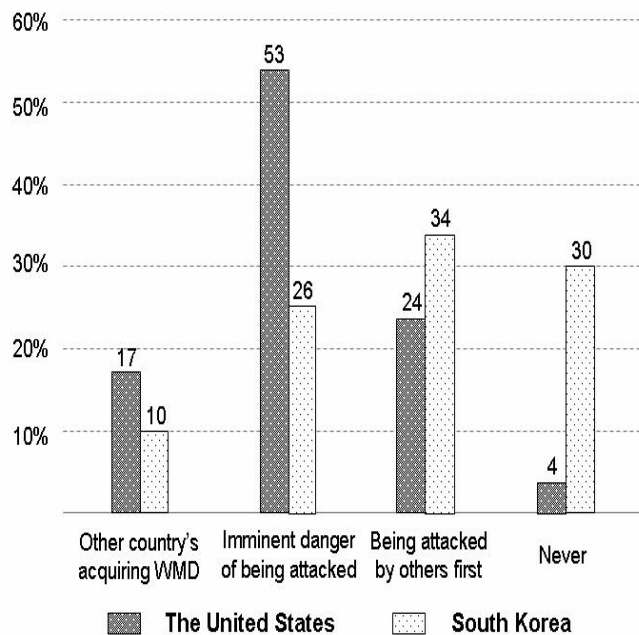


Source: EAI-CCFR-CIDE-COMEXI (July 2004)

The American public, by contrast, is ready to support military action as a strategy to deter the North Korean nuclear program. <Figure\_8> indicates differing attitudes of the Korean and American public regarding the situation where countries can go to war. 55 percent of Americans think that countries can go to war when there is an imminent danger of being attacked by other country while only 26 percent of Koreans support going war in the same situation. 17 percent of Americans support going to war when an enemy country is acquiring WMD, while only 10 percent of Koreans support war in the

same situation. Moreover, 30 percent of Koreans think that war should be avoided in any situation while only 4 percent of Americans think so.

**Figure 8: When Countries Can go to War(%)**



Source: EAI-CCFR-CIDE-COMEXI(July 2004)

In short, the American public are more fearful of international terrorism and the North Korean nuclear program than the Korean public. In addition, the American public favor a more active and aggressive response to international terrorism and North Korean development of WMD. The main reason why the Korean public favor negotiation and dialogue as a resolution strategy of North Korean nuclear program is that military action against North Korea might lead to widespread military conflict or war in the Korean peninsula and would be disastrous to South Korea.

#### **IV. Concluding Remarks**

During the last three years, the public attitude towards the U.S. in South Korea has rapidly shifted towards recognizing the legitimacy of the ROK-U.S. alliance. In addition, there is not so wide a gap between threat perception of the Korean public and the American public toward international terrorism and the North Korean nuclear arms program. Like the American public, the South Koreans feel threatened from the possibility that North Korea might possess nuclear weapons.

However, it would be a mistake to conclude that the crisis in the alliance has been completely resolved. Fragmented public opinion among the South Korean public towards the US and North Korea should be taken into account seriously. If polarization on security issues is left unresolved, generational and ideological conflict around security issues are likely to plague South Korea and may even impede efforts toward an effective North Korean policy and ROK-U.S. alliance.

The recent trend of public opinion indicates that the main source of fissure and rift in the ROK-US alliance is diverging perception and policy stance of the two governments toward North Korea. Considering the fact that the South Korean public shows their support for the US-ROK alliance to deter North Korean threats, the policy stance of the current Korean government does not seem to adequately represent the policy preference of the Korean public. There is a clear gap between policy direction of the South Korean government and the trend of public opinion. The similar gap between the government and public opinion is observed in the United States. According to the 2004 CCFR survey, the American public as well as opinion leaders favor the multilateral approach in dealing with international terrorism and the Iraq issue and there is a clear gap between the Bush administration's policy stance and policy preference of American public. (CCFR, 2004).

Currently, the peace and security of the Korean peninsula seems to be in great danger. While Pyongyang has refused to return to the six party talks and continues to play with the dangerous nuclear card, the Bush administration is considering other options to deter the North Korean nuclear weapons program. To resolve the North Korean nuclear threat, Seoul and Washington must overcome the current state of the strained alliance and solidify their ties of the last fifty years. To do so, Washington and Seoul should cooperate closely in order to create a new common vision and prepare a road map to revitalize the US-ROK alliance.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Korea Herald, "Roh's 'balancer' idea", December 12, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> On the historical development of anti-Americanism in South Korea, see Kim Jin Wung. 1989. "Recent Anti-Americanism in South Korea." *Asian Survey* 29:749-63; Gi-Wook Shin. 1996. "South Korean Anti-Americanism: A Comparative Perspective." *Asian Survey* 36: 787-903; Sook-Jong Lee. 2002. "Sources of Anti-Americanism in Korean Society: Implications for Korea-U.S. Relations." In *Korea-U.S. Relations in Transition*, eds. Baek, Jong Chun and Sang Hyun Lee. Sungnam: The Sejong Institute: 162-80.

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<sup>3</sup> Conservative new papers such as the Chosun Daily in South Korea and renowned columnists such as William Safire and Dick Allen in the United States emphasized the negative impacts of anti-Americanism to the ROK-US alliance.

<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that the South Korean perception of North Korea has completely turned from hostility to friendship. According to the analysis of Tae-Hyun Kim, it includes dualism, coexisting both of hostility and amiability attitude. Tae-Hyun Kim.1998. "South Korean Perceptions and Policies on North Korea." *Foreign Policies and National Integration*, Sunam:Sejong Institute.

<sup>5</sup> On the generational politics and ideological conflicts in South Korea, see Nae-Young Lee. 2002. "Generation and Political Ideology," Sasang. Fall 2002. Seoul: Nanam.

<sup>6</sup> Due to the rapprochement between Seoul and Pyongyang, there has been a shift of perceptions of South Koreans, especially among the young generation, toward the U.S. from that of 'the patron of security' to 'an impediment to the rapprochement between Seoul and Pyongyang..'

<sup>7</sup> Because the joint survey conducted by CCFR in the US and EAI in South Korea in July 2004 utilized the same questionnaire, it is appropriate to measure and compare public perception about North Korea and mutual perception between South Korea and the United States.