

# Between Balancing and Bandwagoning: South Korea's Response to China

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Why has South Korea accommodated China, instead of fearing its growth and balancing against it? This article makes two central arguments. First, concepts of balancing and bandwagoning are fundamentally difficult to test, and to the extent that the theory can be tested, it appears to be wrong in the case of South Korea. In fact, we observe many cases in which rising powers are neither balanced nor “bandwagoned” but are simply accommodated with no fundamental change either way in military stance or alignment posture. Second, the factors that explain South Korean foreign policy orientation toward China are as much about interests as they are about material power. South Korea sees substantially more economic opportunity than military threat associated with China's rise; but even more importantly, South Korea evaluates China's goals as not directly threatening.

**KEYWORDS:** balance of power, accommodation, China, Korea, US alliance

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A central debate in the field of international relations concerns the extent of balancing behavior. Kenneth Waltz's (1993, 17) confident assertion that “hegemony leads to balance” and that it has done so “through all of the centuries we can contemplate” is perhaps the default proposition in international relations. Yet in recent years, the balancing proposition has come under increasing empirical and theoretical scrutiny. Empirically, the absence of obvious balancing against the United States in the post–Cold War era led to a scholarly debate about why that might be the case (Paul 2005; Pape 2005; Schweller 2004; Brooks and Wohlforth 2005; Wohlforth 1999; Ikenberry 2002; Lieber and Alexander 2005). Theoretically, advances by scholars working in both the rationalist and constructivist traditions have pointed out the myriad ways in which state strategies depend on more than just the

distribution of power (Powell 1999; Fearon and Wendt 2002; Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth 2007).

Scholars are also beginning to focus on another case that has the potential to yield significant insights into this debate: China. In the past three decades, China has rapidly emerged as a major regional and global power. Since the introduction of its market reforms in 1978, China has averaged over 9 percent economic growth. Foreign businesses have flocked to invest in the country, and Chinese exports have begun to flood world markets. China is modernizing its military, has joined numerous regional and international institutions, and is increasingly visible in international politics. However, although it would appear that these conditions are ripe for balancing behavior, China has managed to emerge without provoking a regional backlash (Goh 2007/08; Kang 2007; Womack 2003/04).

South Korea—the Republic of Korea (ROK)—presents perhaps the clearest example of this trend. A balance-of-power perspective would expect South Korea to fear a rapidly growing, geographically and demographically massive authoritarian and Communist China that sits on its border. Not only does China already have the military capability to threaten the peninsula, but the power disparity is widening. China also maintains close relations with North Korea—South Korea’s main external threat since 1945. Furthermore, the United States and South Korea have enjoyed a close alliance for over a half century, and it was only US military action that prevented the North (in concert with the Chinese) from conquering the South in 1950. Since that time, the United States has stationed military forces in South Korea to prevent a second North Korean invasion. For all these reasons, the conventional perspectives would expect that South Korea fears a rapidly rising China and clings to its alliance with the United States.

Yet South Korea has drawn closer to China over the past two decades, not farther away. Furthermore, South Korea has had increasing friction with Japan, a capitalist democracy that shares an alliance with the United States. Indeed, South Korea appears more worried about potential Japanese militarization than it is worried about actual Chinese militarization. Although the US-ROK alliance remains strong, the key point for this article is that the alliance is not a balancing alliance against China, and the recent adjustments in the alliance were neither aimed at nor the result of China. In sum, there is little evidence that South Korea will attempt to balance China, and even less evidence that South Korea fears China.

This article makes two central arguments. First, concepts of balancing and bandwagoning are fundamentally difficult to test, and to the extent that the theory can be tested, it appears to be wrong in the case of South Korea. Second, the factors that explain South Korean foreign policy orientation toward China are as much about interests as they are about material power. Balancing and bandwagoning are quite extreme in that they involve substantial commitments—for example, to build up military capabilities or to forgo them; to align with a balancer or to align with the rising power. In fact, however, we observe many cases in which rising powers are neither balanced nor “bandwagoned” but are simply accommodated *with no fundamental change either way in military stance or alignment posture*. This simple observation highlights that there may be even more anomalous cases than the theory suggests—cases where states in effect pursue neither strategy. This suggests that other factors are likely to be at work with respect to state behavior, including most significantly the definition of interests vis-à-vis the rising state.

South Korean accommodation of China is a puzzle because international relations theorists have traditionally associated the rise of great powers with war and instability (Gilpin 1981; Kennedy 1987). Indeed, those scholars who emphasize material power—both military and economic—have long predicted that East Asian states would fear China and balance against it. Realism in all its variants, with its emphasis on balance-of-power politics, has had the most consistently pessimistic expectations for East Asia (Friedberg 1993/94; Roy 1994; Waldron 2003; Layne 1993; Waltz 1993). In 1993, Richard Betts (1993/94, 55) asked, “Should we want China to get rich or not? For realists, the answer should be no, since a rich China would overturn any balance of power.” Twelve years later, John Mearsheimer (Brzezinski and Mearsheimer 2005, 47) confidently wrote that “China cannot rise peacefully. . . . Most of China’s neighbors, including India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, and Vietnam, will likely join with the United States to contain China’s power.” Ashley Tellis (2006, 6) reflects the conventional wisdom when he writes that “the historical evidence thus far suggests that rising powers have invariably generated disruptive forces in the international order, usually leading to systemic wars.”<sup>1</sup>

Rival power-based theories have performed no better in their predictions. Those who argue that China’s increased economic interdependence with the world will constrain its behavior are skeptical that this by itself can solve the security fears of East Asian states (Papayounou and Kastner 1999; Wan 2003). As John Ikenberry (2004, 354) writes,

“Economically, most East Asian countries increasingly expect their future economic relations to be tied to China. . . . Can the region remain stable when its economic and security logics increasingly diverge?” Although interdependence is part of the explanation for East Asian stability, by themselves economic interests do not explain the variation in threat perceptions in East Asia. Indeed, increased economic relations between China, South Korea, and Japan have not had a noticeable impact on their political relations (Rozman 2004).

Accurately describing South Korea’s foreign policy is a critical first step toward explaining why it chose the strategy it has. Although state alignment strategies are often posed as opposites—military balancing against an adversary, or bandwagoning with the stronger power in hopes of gaining benefits or neutralizing the threat—as a strategy, accommodation lies between these poles of balancing and bandwagoning. While not balancing China, South Korea is not bandwagoning with China in all areas and has no intention of kowtowing to China.

The explanation for the absence of South Korean balancing against China lies in both interests and power. What states want is more important than how powerful they are, and the costs and benefits of accommodation of China have created powerful incentives for states to foster good relations with China. There are pragmatic reasons for South Korea to draw closer to China, to be sure. Rising powers pose opportunities as well as threats, and the Chinese economic opportunity and military threat toward its regional neighbors are both potentially huge. South Korea sees substantially more economic opportunity than military threat associated with China’s rise. South Korea’s economic development over the past half century was predicated on international trade and investment, and this strategy is finding its logical extension as South Korea emphasizes its economic and cultural ties with both China and North Korea.

However, South Korea’s foreign policy orientation reflects more than merely the triumph of economic interdependence over power politics. Just as importantly, South Korean evaluation of Chinese goals and intentions is a main factor in determining its strategy. That is, South Korea—and most East Asian states—prefers China to be strong rather than weak, because a strong China stabilizes the region, while a weak China tempts other states to try and control it. Indeed, it may be a mistake to characterize China as a rising power; it may be more accurate to describe China as a reemerging power, one that historically was the dominant state in the region. East Asian states view China’s reemergence as the gravitational center of East Asia as natural. China has a long history of being the dominant state in East Asia, and although it

has not always had warm relations with its neighbors, it has a world-view of itself and the region in which it can be both the most powerful country and yet have stable relations with other states in the region.

Indeed, China has assiduously reassured its neighbors about its intentions and has credibly committed itself to many policies that signal a desire to cooperate and work with East Asian states rather than to unilaterally rewrite the rules (Shambaugh 2004/05; Johnston 2007; Womack 2003/04; Medeiros and Fravel 2003). This strategy has been largely successful, and East Asian observers and states view the likelihood that China will seek territorial expansion or use force against them as low, while most see China as desiring stability and peaceful relations with its neighbors.

The case of South Korea is theoretically important because interests, not power, are the key variables in determining threat and stability in international relations. Much scholarly discussion of China and East Asia has been unduly constricted in its explanatory power by remaining locked into a method that parses differences between various shades of realists and liberals, even as these same analyses emphasize factors such as historical memory, perceptions of China, and the beliefs and intentions of the actors involved. The debate over China's rise and what it means for international politics will most likely continue well into the future, and defining the terms of the debate is a critical first step in that process. The theoretical framework provided here helps to sharpen these seemingly endless paradigmatic debates by posing the central issues more clearly, isolating the important causal factors, and making falsifiable claims.

This article first enters the debate on how to measure balancing in international relations, arguing that a tight definition is the only way in which it is possible to make empirically verifiable claims. The second section describes South Korea's relations with China, noting that they are close and improving on almost all fronts. The third section examines South Korea's main foreign policy goals, focusing on relations with North Korea. A fourth section examines deteriorating US-ROK relations, and the article concludes by discussing possible rejoinders and areas for further research.

## **Threat and Strategies in International Relations**

The first step is to describe the dependent variable—that is, to describe a state's alignment strategy in an empirically consistent and falsifiable

manner. In outlining state strategies, the two most common concepts in the theoretical literature on international relations are balancing and bandwagoning. Although the literature often portrays states' alignment decisions as a stark dichotomy between balancing and bandwagoning, these are only the two most extreme polar positions a state can choose. Traditionally, the standard and most widely accepted measures of balancing are investments by states to "turn latent power (i.e., economic, technological, social, and natural resources) into military capabilities" (Lieber and Alexander 2005, 119). Balancing can be internal (military preparations and arms buildups directed at an obvious threat) or external (forging countervailing military alliances with other states against the threat) (Morrow 1993). Conversely, bandwagoning is generally understood to be the decision by a state to align itself with the threatening power in order to either neutralize the threat or benefit from the spoils of victory (Walt 1987; Schweller 1994).

Although these concepts seem straightforward, a furious scholarly debate has broken out over how to measure balancing. Because many states in the post-Cold War era are not engaged in obvious military balancing against the United States as defined above, an entire literature has introduced concepts such as *soft balancing* and *underbalancing* to explain why "hard" balancing has not occurred against the United States. For example, Robert Pape (2005, 10) defines soft balancing as "actions that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance but that use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies . . . [such as] using international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangements."

However, terms such as *soft balancing* and *underbalancing* make it virtually impossible to falsify the balancing proposition. That is, if the term *balancing* and the underlying theoretical argument that emphasizes power as essentially threatening can include both obvious military and political attempts to counter a known adversary as well as more subtle disagreements that fall well short of war, it is almost impossible to provide evidence that could falsify this viewpoint. Furthermore, given that lying at the extreme end of the spectrum is yet another escape clause that some states are "too small to balance" (Pape 2005, 1), theoretical adjectives such as "hard" and "soft" when referring to balancing have limited analytic usefulness and stretch the definition of that concept to the point of irrelevance. As Keir Lieber and Gerard Alexander (2005, 109) write, "Discussion of soft balancing is much ado about nothing. Defining or operationalizing the concept is difficult; the behavior typically identified by it seems identical to normal diplomatic friction, and regardless, the

evidence does not support specific predictions suggested by those advancing the concept.” Absent a falsifiable claim that can be empirically verified, adding adjectives is merely an ad hoc attempt to retain a theoretical preconception.

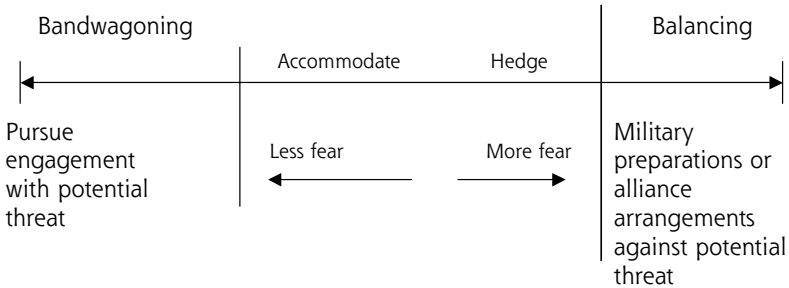
What about economic balancing? Tariffs are not balancing if they are imposed generally and all states are equally affected. Even preferential trading blocs, although they discriminate against some countries, are not necessarily balancing. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) discriminates against countries outside the region, but this is nested in a larger game that is ultimately aimed at reducing tariffs worldwide. Furthermore, while economic sanctions may be designed to weaken an adversary, the underlying cause is concern about the future use of force, and thus sanctions fit comfortably under balancing as it has traditionally been defined. That is, when assessing balancing behavior, the critical variable remains a state’s concern about the use of force.

For the purposes of this article, I define balancing tightly, as preparations for the use of force, or “hard” balancing: military buildups and defense spending, or countervailing military alliances aimed at an adversary (Waltz 1979, 118). Bandwagoning, on the other hand, will refer to clear attempts to curry favor with a state through military alliances or economic and diplomatic cooperation. These strategies involve considerable commitments: for example, once a decision has been made to invest in military capabilities or to forgo them, it will take many years and substantial financial resources to either see the results or alter the path. Clear as they are, however, these strategies by no means exhaust the possible responses to rising powers. Between these two extremes lies a large middle area where states avoid making an obvious choice, and states are simply accommodated, with no basic change in a state’s military stance or alignment posture. It is theoretically and empirically important to distinguish this middle strategy from the extreme polar opposites of balancing and bandwagoning.

Labels for strategies within this middle area include engagement, accommodation, hiding, and hedging, as well as numerous other similar strategies (Goh 2005). Within these middle strategies, the most important distinction is between strategies that represent more or less fear of a potential adversary. Countries may not balance but still be somewhat skeptical of another country, in which case it might prefer to hedge. Yet countries that do not fear a larger state do not hedge, even if they do not bandwagon. Those strategies can be called accommodation—attempts to cooperate and craft stability that are short of slavish bandwagoning.

State strategies exist along a continuum, not as dichotomous opposites, and by defining state strategies in this way, it is possible to empirically derive variation along the dependent variable in a falsifiable manner (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 A Spectrum of Alignment Strategies**



A further analytical clarification should be made about the use of terms to describe state interactions. While states often have sharp disagreements with each other over a range of issues, words such as *conflict* or *tension* do not help to disaggregate between conflicts that are genuinely dangerous and could lead to war, those that are serious and could have consequences for diplomatic or economic relations between states, and those that may have domestic political currency but will not affect relations between states in any meaningful manner. All negotiations do not end in conflict, and all conflicts do not end in war. As with measuring balancing behavior, the conventional distinction has been based on whether the use of force is a possibility (Van Evera 1999). That is, of paramount importance are issues that could involve actual military confrontation.

There are issues between states that may not have the potential to escalate to actual military conflict but that still have real consequences for interactions between states—for example, economic disputes that could affect trade and investment flows. There are also those issues between states that do not have a measurable impact on actual interactions between states but do have rhetorical or domestic currency. Paying explicit attention to what type of issues exist between states—issues that could involve the use of force, issues that may be consequential but not likely to lead to military conflict, and issues that are primarily domes-



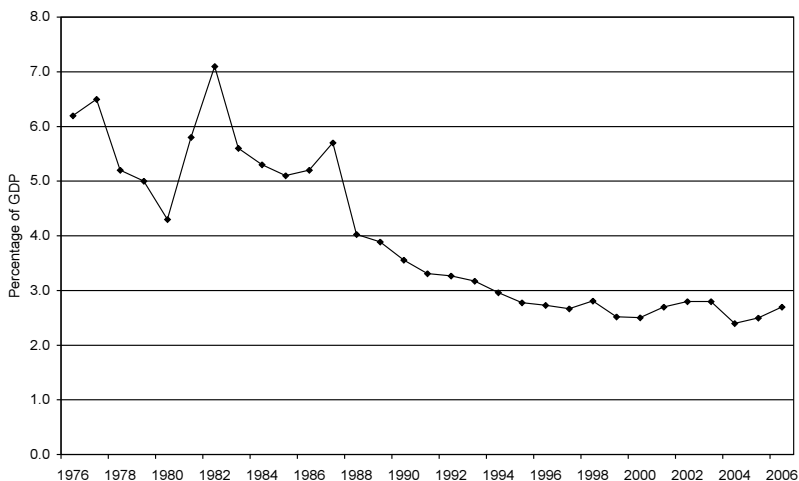
tic or rhetorical—helps us better categorize and describe the salience of various issues in East Asia and provides a categorization that can discern and explain variation across the dependent variable.

For example, the issue of North Korea's nuclear weapons is consequential and could easily lead to the use of force. Alternatively, contested ownership of the Tokdo/Takeshima Island is unlikely to lead to the use of force, but how the issue is resolved could have economic consequences for states in the region. Finally, diplomatic maneuvering and debate about which countries should be included in the East Asian Summit remain at the level of diplomatic squabbling, with little measurable impact on any state in the region.

### **Measuring South Korea's Foreign Policy Orientation Toward China**

South Korea represents perhaps the paradigmatic case of how China is reshaping foreign relations in the region. South Korea has shown little inclination to balance China and instead appears on the whole to be moving steadily—and, skeptics have argued, naively—to expand its relations with China. South Korea and China have similar stances on a range of foreign policy issues, from the best way to deal with North Korea to concerns about the future of Japanese foreign policy. What makes the South Korean case even more vivid is that South Korea has been one of the closest US allies in the region for over sixty years.

South Korean strategic and military planning has not been focused on a potential Chinese threat. South Korea has also shown considerable deference to China, especially in its reluctance to support fully US plans for theater missile defense (Cha 2003). South Korea's 2004 National Security Strategy calls the Sino-ROK relationship a "comprehensive cooperative partnership" and calls for greater military exchanges between the two countries. South Korea's defense spending has decreased by over half, from 7.1 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 1982 to 2.8 percent of GDP in 2006 (Figure 2). If South Korea felt an imminent or distant military threat, it would ostensibly spend as much on defense as it did during the height of the Cold War. A senior defense official said in 2006, "We are not planning on any type of conflict with China. The opposite, actually—we're increasing our cooperation with China in military exchanges."<sup>2</sup> South Korean military spending reflects its aim first to deal with contingencies in North Korea and second to have robust defense capabilities for unanticipated events.

**Figure 2 South Korean Defense Spending (% of GDP), 1976–2006**

Source: IISS, "The Military Balance," various years.

Both of these could be deemed "hedging" against China, but the evidence for a direct concern about China remains mostly speculation at this point.

South Korean military capabilities have remained roughly the same over the past decade, and the ambitious Defense Reform 2020 plan is aimed notably at replacing outdated 1960s-era weaponry while maintaining the ability to deal with contingencies regarding North Korea (Han 2006; Bennett 2006). The ROK air force will replace 1960s-era F-4s and 150 F-16s with 60 KF-15s and 60 KF-Xs and 170 KF-16s (Table 1) and add 4 AWACS and 4 tankers, and "the resulting force should be a significant improvement in aggregate capabilities" (Bennett 2006, 5). The navy will reduce its outdated surface combat ships and upgrade the submarine force and add Aegis capabilities while reducing the overall quantity of combat ships. The greatest reduction in personnel will come from the army, which will reduce its size by one-third and reduce the number of divisions from forty-seven to twenty-four. Bruce Bennett (2006, 7) notes that although the new ROK military will be "more powerful, it is important to note that this will be a much smaller force . . . despite its qualitative improvements, these reductions pose the risk that the 2020 ROK military will be perceived by some as being weaker."

It is revealing that South Korea's newest military purchases are mainly maritime in nature, with the newly christened *Great King Se-*

**Table 1 South Korea's Defense Reform Plan 2020**

Force Type	2004	2020
Air force personnel	64,000	65,000
Fighter aircraft	0 high end 150 F-16 380 F-4, F-5, A-37	60 KF-15, 60 KF-X 170 KF-16 130 A-50
AWACS	0	4
Tankers	0	4
Submarines	0	9
Destroyers	3 KDX I, 2 KDX II	3 KDX I, 6 KDX II, 6 KDX III
Army active-duty personnel	560,000	360,000
Tanks	2,300	1,700
Artillery/multiple rocket launchers	5,300	3,700

Source: Bruce Bennett, "A Brief Analysis of the Republic of Korea's Defense Reform Plan," RAND Occasional Paper (Santa Monica: RAND, 2006).

*jong* Aegis destroyer the first of at least three and perhaps six destroyers. If South Korea considered China a threat, ostensibly its force structure would be different. Naval forces are less effective for deterring a land threat from either North Korea or China, but it does reveal that South Korea's main concerns are naval. The *Taipei Times*, on July 3, 2007, quoted South Korean president Roh commenting on the launch of the *Sejong*: "South and North Korea will not keep picking quarrels with each other forever. . . . We have to equip the nation with the capability to defend itself. The Aegis destroyer we are dedicating today could be the best symbol of that capability." Perhaps even more interestingly, the experimental assault amphibious landing ship has been christened a "Dokdo" class of ships, which did not please the Japanese (*Japan Policy and Politics* 2005).

The accommodation of China extends to the political sphere. In a survey of National Assembly members, the South Korean newspaper *Donga Ilbo*, on April 19, 2004, found that 55 percent of newly elected members chose China as the most important target of South Korea's future diplomacy, while 42 percent of old-timers chose China. In 2006, a senior South Korean government official said, "China has no intention of threatening the Korean peninsula. China wants stability on its borders, and it has very good relations with us. We are also deeply intertwined on economic issues as well as cooperating on security issues."<sup>3</sup>

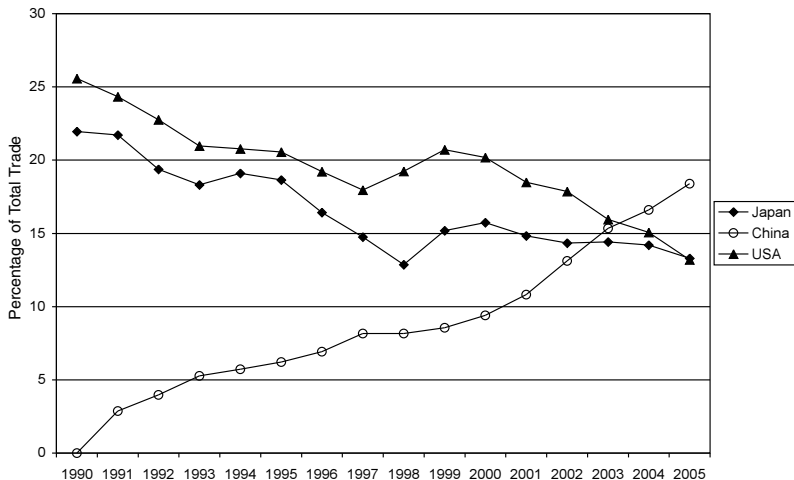
In economic relations, and much like every other country in the region, South Korea increasingly sees its economic fate tied to the future of the Chinese economy. The potential benefits are large, especially

given the two countries' geographic proximity and shared cultural similarities. Though there are clearly worries in South Korea over the rapid rise of Chinese manufacturing and technological prowess, this concern has not stopped the headlong rush of South Korean firms into China. Nor does the South Korean government resist regional moves—mostly initiated by China—to further both economic integration and open borders.

China's attraction to South Korea was demonstrated in 2003 when the PRC surpassed the United States as the largest export market for South Korean products—a position the United States had held since 1965. Figure 3 shows total trade (imports and exports) between South Korea and China, Japan, and the United States. Most notable is not that China has become the largest trading partner of South Korea but how quickly that transition took place. In 2003, South Korea invested more in China than did the United States (US\$4.7 billion to US\$4.2 billion). In that same year, ROK exports to China increased 35 percent to US\$47.5 billion, far surpassing South Korean exports to the United States, which increased 7 percent to US\$36.7 billion. Over 25,000 South Korean companies now have production facilities in China (Moon 2004, 32). South Korea's Woori Bank has a 150-member research group focused on China, and by 2004 all the major South Korean banks had opened branch offices in China (Kim 2004).

China's increased importance to South Korea can be seen in more than economic interactions. The number of Chinese language schools

**Figure 3 South Korean Total Trade (%), 1990–2005**



in South Korea increased 44 percent in the two-year period from 2003 to 2005 (Park and Han 2006). The China National Tourism Office reports that over 4 million South Koreans visit China each year, a number that continues to grow. In 2006, more than 54,000 South Koreans were studying at Chinese universities (38 percent of all foreign students in China), while over 300,000 South Koreans had become long-term residents in China (Lee 2006).

Public opinion polls about South Korea–China relations reflect this trend. A May 28, 2007, Chicago Council on World Affairs opinion poll found that while 38 percent of South Koreans felt relations with China were improving and over 40 percent felt they were the same, only 15 percent saw them as worsening. When asked which country was most important for South Korea to have good relations with, an April 5, 2006, poll conducted by *Donga Ilbo* newspaper in South Korea revealed that 17.3 percent of respondents saw the United States as the most threatening to South Korea, while only 6.7 percent saw China as the most threatening country.<sup>4</sup> When asked about potential concerns related to China, 26 percent chose negative economic consequences, and only 8 percent chose China’s military buildup. The US State Department conducted a particularly revealing poll among South Koreans in November 2005. Asked their views of various countries, 53 percent of respondents evaluated relations between South Korea and China as favorable, the same percentage that held favorable views of the United States. Over 70 percent of South Koreans viewed ROK-China relations as “good,” against 58 percent who rated ROK-US relations as also “good.” When asked which country would be the future power center of Asia in five to ten years, an overwhelming majority chose China (75 percent) instead of the United States (8 percent). Finally, when surveyed as to who would be South Korea’s closest economic partner in five to ten years, 11 percent chose the United States, and 78 percent chose China. Thus, most South Koreans not only see China as the future power center of East Asia, but, in contrast to realist predictions, also view China somewhat favorably and focus more on economic than military issues.

The lack of South Korean fear does not imply a swing to the other extreme of bandwagoning with China. There is no naive belief in South Korea that relations with China will forever be peaceful and stable and thus that there is no need for any military preparations. South Korea is between the two extremes: it is adjusting to and accepting of China’s role and goals in the region for now; but by no means have South Korea and China crafted the deep stability that characterizes US-Canada relations, for example. It is also worth remembering that South Korean

presidents—even conservative ones—have an independent streak, and as Scott Snyder (2008, 17) has pointed out, “South Korea’s need to enhance the relative importance of inter-Korean economic relations in order to demonstrate political relevance and independence of action from both the United States and China runs counter to American and Chinese interests.”

In sum, despite some tensions in the ROK-China relationship, China has rapidly become an extremely important economic and diplomatic partner for South Korea. South Korea has warm and increasingly close relations with China along a range of security, economic, and diplomatic issues and does not want to be forced to choose between Beijing and Washington. Although there is little sentiment in Seoul to replace the United States with China as South Korea’s closest ally—and despite Seoul’s regarding Beijing’s influence in Pyongyang as worrisome—continued improvement in Seoul’s relations with Beijing means that South Korea’s foreign policy orientation is gradually shifting. Though still important, the United States is no longer the only powerful country to which South Korea must pay attention.

The events of the past few decades have led to a fundamental shift in South Korea’s foreign policy orientation, its attitudes toward the United States and China, and its own self-image. However, in a process that Jae-ho Chung (2007) calls “the choice of not making choices,” although South Korea and China have increasingly close economic and cultural ties and share a similar foreign policy orientation toward North Korea, South Korea has not bandwagoned with China, nor does it wish to abandon its close ties with the United States.

## **South Korea’s Foreign Policy Interests**

An examination of South Korea’s actual foreign policy goals and interests reveals the empirical complexity of determining balancing or bandwagoning. Domestic political alignments are an important factor in determining state strategies, and here South Korean politics reveal more continuity than change. Although the recent election of President Lee Myung-bak in South Korea was expected to herald a return to a more “conservative” South Korean foreign policy, in reality the Lee government has continued its predecessors’ overall strategy toward China (Kang 2008). Indeed, as far back as 1989, conservative president Roh Tae-woo engaged China through his “nordpolitik,” while more re-

cent progressive presidents such as Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun also engaged China.

This continuity exists in part because North Korea remains South Korea's primary foreign policy concern, and on this matter, Chinese and South Korean strategies are more complementary than competitive. Both South Koreans and Chinese believe that North Korea—although a major potential security threat—can be deterred and are just as worried about the economic and political consequences of a collapsed regime. To put the matter in perspective, should North Korea collapse, the 2004 World Refugee Survey (US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants 2004) estimates that the number of refugees could potentially exceed the entire global refugee population. Even assuming a best-case scenario in which such a collapse did not turn violent, the regional economic and political effects would be severe, with the heaviest costs falling on South Korea and China (Ellings and Eberstadt 2001). Alternatively, were a war to break out, the potential consequences would devastate the region. The commander of US forces in South Korea estimated that a war could result in US\$1 trillion in industrial damage and over 1 million casualties on the peninsula (Cha and Kang 2003). For these reasons, both South Korea and China share a similar—and complex—foreign policy calculus: how to avoid North Korean rapid regime collapse on the one hand, while restraining and deterring North Korea on the other.

Thus, during the second nuclear crisis (2002–2007) the South Korean populace and leadership urged restraint, although the Bush administration took a harder line. For example, a *Donga Ilbo* opinion poll found in March 2005 that 77 percent of South Koreans supported the use of diplomatic means and talks with North Korea in response to its nuclear weapons development and kidnapping of foreign civilians. Significantly, even those from the “older generations” were solidly in favor of engagement. Of those in their sixties or older, 63.6 percent supported diplomatic means. A *Choson Ilbo* opinion poll in 2006 revealed that 65.9 percent of South Koreans between sixteen and twenty-five said they would side with North Korea in the event of a war between North Korea and the United States. The seemingly confounding opinions of South Koreans were not naive—they resulted from a plausible belief that it was the United States, not North Korea, that might start a war of which they would bear the brunt of the costs. Significantly, South Korean attitudes toward the United States improved when the United States—not South Korea—became more flexible in its approach toward North Korea, particularly after 2007.

Significantly, China's and South Korea's policies toward North Korea have been similar, for similar reasons. Chinese officials have urged patience with North Korea: on January 14, 2005, the *JoonAng Ilbo* quoted Chinese ambassador to South Korea Li Bin saying, "To think that North Korea will collapse is far-fetched speculation. The fundamental problem is the North's ailing economy. If the economic situation improves, I think we can resolve the defector problem. The support of the South Korean government will greatly help North Korea in this respect." Other Chinese commentators echoed this sentiment. In early 2005, Piao Jianyi (French 2005) of the Institute of Asia Pacific Studies in Beijing said that "although many of our friends see it as a failing state, potentially one with nuclear weapons, China has a different view. North Korea has a reforming economy that is very weak, but every year is getting better, and the regime is taking measures to reform its economy, so perhaps the U.S. should reconsider its approach."

The 2007 election of president Lee Myung-bak—a supposed conservative—would appear to pose a challenge to the idea of an accommodationist South Korea and suggest that there are political forces in South Korea that are more interested in balancing China than this model suggests; and it would also appear to imply that the definition of interests is contested and that a domestic adjustment process is now going on in which an overly accommodationist government is being "corrected" by one that is more focused on balancing. Lee ran on a platform pledging to return to traditional South Korean policies and to overcome the liberal excesses of the previous two administrations by strengthening the US-ROK alliance and taking a more skeptical approach toward North Korea.

However, the first year of Lee's administration actually reveals continued accommodation to China, not increased distance and nascent balancing behavior. As I discuss in the next section, the strengthening of the alliance with the United States did not appear to be motivated by China but rather by fundamental changes in the approach to North Korea. It is also noteworthy that the election certainly did not reflect strong differences in dealing with China—or even on foreign policy more generally. For example, a *Donga Ilbo* opinion poll from July 14, 2007, revealed that while 78 percent of voters put domestic economic issues as their first or second concern in the coming election, the US alliance was chosen by only 1.9 percent of respondents and "national security" by only 8.4 percent.

More significantly, China-ROK relations have actually grown closer under Lee, not more distant. Even a supposed conservative like



Lee realizes that dealing with China is now as important as dealing with the United States and Japan. For example, the *Donga Ilbo*, on May 30, 2008, quoted Lee as saying, “It is not desirable that Korea sides with a particular country. To maintain peace in the region, a balanced diplomacy is needed. . . . Korea-U.S. relations and Korea-China relations are not contrary to each other but mutually complementary.” This growing stability in Sino–South Korean relations was reflected in the successful Lee-Hu summit in May 2008, where China and South Korea agreed to upgrade their relationship to the level of a “strategic cooperative partnership,” the highest level of diplomatic relations that China maintains with other countries.

Under Lee Myung-bak, military exchanges and defense cooperation have also continued to grow. In August 2008, the ROK and Chinese militaries agreed to exchange visits by senior defense and military officials, to observe each other’s military training exercises, to establish military hotlines, and to conduct low-level joint exercises, such as search-and-rescue operations by the two navies. The two countries also began discussions about sharing intelligence on North Korea (Jung 2008a, 28). *Xinhua* quoted South Korean prime minister Han Seung-so, on September 5, 2008, saying that “South Korea and China have witnessed an unprecedented expansion of bilateral ties over the years since they forged diplomatic relations . . . cooperation between the two nations has been rapidly expanding in politics, culture, economy and social aspects in a very short period of time as the two sides only forged diplomatic ties 16 years ago.” Thus, despite a change of political leadership, South Korea–Chinese relations have continued to grow closer.

In exploring South Korea’s interests and perceptions, it is worth noting that both official and public opinion remains more wary about Japanese than Chinese aims. In fact, both China and South Korea reacted negatively to Japan’s more recent nationalist and territorial claims, and both share a profound suspicion about Japan’s ultimate foreign policy motives and goals. National reaction was similar in both countries to Japan’s claims about comfort women, nationalist textbooks, the Dokdo/Takeshima and Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands, and Japanese politicians’ visiting Yasukuni Shrine. To cite one of many examples, a South Korean poll taken in 2007 revealed that while 63.9 percent of South Koreans believed North Korean nuclear weapons posed a potential threat, over 90 percent believed that a nuclear-armed Japan would pose a threat (Lankov 2008, 11). Indeed, the recurrent Japanese claims to the Dokdo islets have prompted the Lee government—which had originally promised a policy toward Japan of “not dwelling

on the past but proceeding forward”—to actually consider reducing or cutting military exchanges with Japan (Jung 2008b).

Nor have ROK-China relations been completely smooth. In recent years, the two countries have clashed verbally over the nature of the ancient kingdom of Koguryo (37 B.C.E.–668 C.E.), with both sides claiming that Koguryo was a historical antecedent to their modern nation (Gries 2005). This dispute does not, however, appear likely to have any substantive effect on relations between the two countries, in part because the dispute is not a function of official Chinese government policy but rather is limited to unofficial claims made by Chinese academics (Scofield 2004). China and North Korea formally delineated their border in 1962, with China ceding 60 percent of the disputed territory. In contrast to South Korea’s territorial dispute with Japan over the Tokdo/Takeshima Island, which was never formally resolved, the dispute over Koguryo is restricted to claims about history, and at no time has the Chinese government made any attempt to abrogate the 1962 treaty or to renegotiate the actual border (Fravel 2005). By the tenth century, Korea and China had established the Yalu River as their border, and by the fifteenth century, Korea’s long northern border—along both the Yalu and Tumen rivers—was essentially secure and peaceful, and these two rivers have formed the border between China and Korea ever since (Ledyard 1994, 290). Perhaps most significantly, the debate over Koguryo—which has died down considerably since 2004—is about history, identity, and national narratives, not power.

In sum, despite a change of political leadership in South Korea, China–South Korea relations have continued to grow closer, not more distant. This is reflective of fundamental South Korean interests—most notably, its concern about events in North Korea. China and South Korea share similar perspectives on how best to handle North Korea and furthermore have seen relations across the board growing warmer, not colder.

## **The US Role in Northeast Asia**

One challenge to the approach taken here is the response that South Korea is in fact balancing against China through the maintenance of the US–South Korea relationship. Even during the stormy years of the DJ Kim and Roh presidencies, the alliance survived strong differences and was even strengthened and reconfigured in an ambitious way: South Korea sent more troops to Iraq than any country other than the United

States and Britain, the ROK and US militaries have adjusted to a major reconfiguration of the US military deployments in South Korea, and the two countries have signed (but not yet ratified) a bilateral free trade agreement. This would suggest that the South Koreans themselves are hedging or maintaining a potential balancing option of their own, as the balance-of-power theorists would predict.

However, the US-ROK alliance is directed more fundamentally to the North and to other contingencies, and the alliance is not a balancing exercise against China. Furthermore, there appears little evidence that the alliance has *changed* to accommodate rising Chinese power, and agreements on out-of-area operations do not appear to relate to China. The military aspect of the alliance has undergone fairly major changes in the past few years; but this was driven by US out-of-area needs (particularly the “war on terror”) and South Korean domestic considerations, not China. The two allies signed a base-restructuring agreement that includes the return of over sixty US camps to the South Koreans, as well as the relocation of the US Army headquarters from downtown Seoul to the countryside. By 2012, wartime operational control will return to South Korea, and the United States is reducing its South Korean deployments from 37,000 to 25,000 troops (US Department of Defense 2000). US power on the peninsula is thus actually decreasing, and as a result, it has been noted that “the U.S. will emphasize the ROK’s primary leading role in defending itself. Physically, the U.S. seems not to have sufficient augmentation forces, especially ground troops” (Choi and Park 2007, 18).

As a potential hedge against unanticipated problems that may arise in the future, the United States may provide a form of reassurance to South Korea, *depending* on the circumstances. Indeed, few argue that the United States would come to the aid of East Asian states unless it was in the United States’ own interests to do so. Whether the United States would aid South Korea depends, as always, on the actual nature of the issue and the circumstances at the time. In part, this is a rational South Korean expectation: it is unwise to expect another country to unquestioningly support an ally, even a long-standing one. The United States and ROK acknowledged this possibility in their Strategic Consultation for an Allied Partnership on January 20, 2006:

The ROK, as an ally, fully understands the rationale for the transformation of the U.S. global military strategy, and *respects the necessity for the strategic flexibility of U.S. forces in the ROK*. In the implementation of strategic flexibility, *the U.S. respects the ROK position*

that it shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people. (Choi and Park 2007, 13, emphasis added)

Finally, the United States is not balancing China either, and thus it is no surprise that South Korea does not view the alliance as balancing China. In fact, US policy toward China for the past thirty years has not been to contain China and keep it weak, as a nascent balancing strategy would suggest. Rather, the United States has consciously pursued the opposite policy: to help China grow and develop and to become a major regional and even global power. Seven consecutive US presidents have encouraged China's integration into the global system, from Richard Nixon's belief that "dealing with Red China . . . means pulling China back into the world community" (Nixon 1967/68, 123) to President George W. Bush's welcoming "the emergence of a China that is peaceful and prosperous, and that supports international institutions" (Bush, 2006). As Thomas Christensen (2006, 108) notes, "Especially if one uses the United States' containment policies toward the Soviet Union as a basis of comparison, the [argument] that the United States has been dedicated to a grand strategy of containment of China as a general policy to maintain U.S. hegemony is, for the most part, divorced from reality."

For example, the Bush administration's 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States* stated that "the United States welcomes the emergence of a strong, peaceful, and prosperous China." The US military has also increasingly called for engagement and interaction with the Chinese military. On May 18, 2006, during a four-city tour of Chinese military bases by Admiral William Fallon, commander of US forces in the Asia-Pacific, the *Bloomberg News* quoted the admiral as saying that "the more they are like us, the easier it will be. . . . This is one area where the secretary of defense [Donald Rumsfeld] in particular has been pro-engagement." The United States and China have also discussed establishing a military hotline and joint naval drills (NHK 2006).

Official Bush administration policy has been to encourage China to be a "responsible stakeholder"—that is, official US policy claims that the key factor in determining whether the United States fears or welcomes China as a great power is not whether China is strong and rich but rather what its desires and intentions are. Many recent US policy analyses of China recognize that whether China's rise is stabilizing or destabilizing depends on China's identity and how that develops over time. For example, the 2006 *National Security Strategy of the United*

*States* called for a policy to “encourage China to make the right strategic decisions for its people while we hedge against other possibilities.” In December 2005, former US deputy secretary of state Robert Zoellick (US Department of State 2005) called on China to become a “responsible stakeholder” in international affairs. The US focus on Chinese goals rather than power has been a long-standing aspect of US foreign policy. As Iain Johnston (2007, xvii) has noted, “The Clinton administration’s strategy of constructive engagement was, for some, aimed at pulling China into the “international community” and exposing it to new norms of the market and domestic governance.”

The United States remains by far the most powerful and important country in the world, and all East Asian states would like more, not less, US attention to the region. Yet this also means that East Asian states know they cannot rely on, or expect, unquestioned US support. Most East Asian states welcome or accept US leadership, but the actual US-ROK alliance is not designed to deal with China, nor is it being modified with that purpose in mind.

## Conclusion

This case study of South Korea’s response to China’s rise yields a number of important implications for our theories of international relations. The extent and limits of balance-of-power theory, especially when applied to the rise and fall of great powers, has long been a central preoccupation of students of international relations. Now China is in the middle of what may be a long ascent toward global great power status. Indeed, it may already be a great power, with the only question being how much bigger China may become. The rise of China, and whether it can peacefully find a place in East Asia and the world, is thus one of the most important issues in contemporary international politics. This debate appears set to continue well into the future, and defining the terms of the debate and isolating the central issues is therefore an important step.

Empirically testing a concept such as *balancing* is far more complex than it appears. The concept is more useful when it is applied carefully and defined tightly—as military preparations toward a potential or actual security threat. The addition of terms such as *soft balancing*, *underbalancing*, and *prebalancing* does little to provide empirically testable claims but instead appears aimed more at saving a theory from falsification.

Furthermore, privileging the distribution of power as the key determinant of stability and state behavior is a mistake. In determining whether states are threatening, what they want is more important than how big they are. Security-seeking, status quo states provoke different responses from other states than do revisionist, expansionist powers, and states make their policies based on what they believe these interests and identities to be.

China's rise is forcing South Korea to deal with these issues. While most international relations theories and, indeed, most American policymakers see the United States as the most obvious and benign ally with which South Korea should ally, China's proximity and its massive size mean that South Korea must deal with China. And yet, instead of being threatened by China, for the time being South Korea shares similar policy orientations on issues such as the best way to solve the nuclear crisis. South Korea shows few signs of security fears regarding China. Even South Korean conservatives do not advocate a balancing posture against China. Thus, while there may be a transition occurring in East Asia, it is clear that the pessimistic predictions regarding China's rise have not begun to manifest themselves on the Korean peninsula. Rather than fearing China, South Korea appears to be adjusting to China's place in Northeast Asia and is seeking to benefit from close ties with China while maintaining good relations with the United States.

China has also put considerable effort into reassuring its East Asian neighbors about its intentions (Shambaugh 2004/05; Medeiros and Fravel 2003). No state determines its interests in a vacuum—states respond to other states' actions and their beliefs about other states' intentions. In this way, South Korea and China have moved closer together rather than farther apart on many of their policies and overall strategies.

Thus, at this stage, South Korea is not balancing China. Yet this is only the beginning of a new era in Northeast Asia, and skeptics respond to explanations for East Asian stability by claiming either that East Asian states are too small to balance China, or that thirty years is not enough time to see balancing emerge.<sup>5</sup> Yet both these rejoinders are ad hoc arguments, rest on an assumption of fear that is empirically unfounded, and are an admission by realists that their theories do not explain East Asia. Most importantly, the assertion that small states inevitably fear larger states is contradicted by a large body of scholarship that probes whether and when this might be the case (Sechser 2006; Kydd 2005). The assumption of fear is highly questionable in general and certainly with respect to South Korea. Beliefs of states must be empirically demonstrated, not asserted. Fear is not the dominant South Korean atti-

tude toward China. Empirically, small states rarely capitulate in the face of overweening power. North Korea continues to defy intense US pressure, Vietnam fought China as recently as 1979 when their interests diverged, and the Japanese started a war with the United States they knew beforehand that they could not win and continued to fight long after the outcome was certain (Sagan 1988). At a minimum, the onus is on those who argue that East Asian states are “too small to balance” to show empirically that these states actually fear China, that they have searched all available internal and external balancing options, and that they decided ultimately that capitulation was the best policy to follow. Anything less is not a serious analytic argument but rather an admission by realists that their theories about balance of power do not apply.

A more reasonable question is whether balancing will happen in the future. Yet even here the question will be answered more by how Chinese and South Korean interests and beliefs change rather than how powerful China becomes. Realists themselves argue that states are highly concerned with future possibilities and prepare for those contingencies today—indeed, the core of the security dilemma derives from fears of the future even if the present is peaceful (Jervis 1978). In fewer than three decades, China has gone from being a moribund and isolated middle power to being the most dynamic country in the region, with an economy that shows many signs of continuing to grow. By realist standards, China should already be provoking balancing behavior, merely because it is already so big and its potential rate of growth is so high. Yet this article has shown that the dramatic power transition in North-east Asia has evoked very little response from its neighbors. Five or even ten years of Chinese growth would be too early to draw conclusions; but as decades accrue, the argument that balancing is just around the corner becomes less plausible.

It is true, however, that even though most major trends over the past three decades have led to more stability and cooperation in East Asia, there is no guarantee that these trends will continue indefinitely. Indeed, any discussion about China and East Asia’s past and current relations invites speculation about what the future might hold. The research I have presented here highlights that concerns about how China might act a generation from now center on interests, not power. That is, much of the speculation about China’s future course focuses on the consequences that might follow if China becomes a democracy, how the Chinese Communist Party might evolve, and how Chinese nationalism and its interactions with other states will evolve—all of which will have a major impact on what China wants and how other states in

the region and around the world perceive it. However, this article is not an attempt to predict the future but rather is concerned with explaining outcomes of the past decades. The policies China, South Korea, and other countries adopt today will have an impact on how the region evolves. The security, economic, and cultural architecture of East Asia are clearly in flux, and how China and South Korea might behave in the future when beliefs and circumstances are fundamentally different is an open question and an exercise with limited intellectual utility.

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1. Some "defensive realists" are fairly optimistic about the future of East Asia, emphasizing nuclear deterrence and geography (Goldstein 2005; Ross 1999).

2. Personal interview, March 17, 2006.

3. Ibid.

4. This is presumably from fear that the United States would start a war with North Korea; as that fear has diminished so have South Korean concerns about the United States as a threat to peace on the peninsula.

5. Kenneth Waltz (1979, 127) has written that "secondary states, *if they are free to choose*, flock to the weaker side" (emphasis added).

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