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**TACIT ACCEPTANCE  
AND WATCHFUL EYES:  
Beijing's Views  
about the U.S.-ROK Alliance**

Fei-Ling Wang



The Korea Science and Technology Agency



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U.S. Army War College

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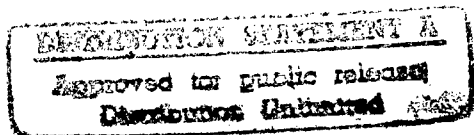
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**Fei-Ling Wang**

**January 24, 1997**



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## FOREWORD

In October 1995, the Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute and the Institute for Far Eastern Studies of Kyungnam University, in partnership with the Defense Nuclear Agency and The Korea Society, hosted in Seoul, Korea, an international workshop on the U.S.-ROK Alliance. For nearly a half century, the security alliance between the ROK and the United States has deterred aggression, helped assure stability in Northeast Asia, and supported the ROK's political and economic emergence as one of the advanced democratic industrial countries of the world.

In this monograph, originally presented at the workshop, Professor Wang Fei-ling examines the future of the alliance from China's perspective. He suggests that China's current preoccupation with its domestic agenda and relatively conservative foreign policy seek to maintain the *status quo* in Northeast Asia. And that *status quo* makes even continued U.S. military presence desirable in the context of a divided Korea because it buttresses stability and inhibits militarism in Japan. But an American presence that grows, takes on the flavor of containment, or emphasizes human rights and the enlargement of democracy threatens Chinese security interests. Overall, concern that Northeast Asia is on the verge of significant transformation in economics, governments, and balance of power relationships lends an inevitable duality to Chinese attitudes toward the Washington-Seoul relationship.

Dr. Wang's comments provide insight into China's probable reaction to various scenarios of change possible in the next decade. The Sino-American relationship will become increasingly important, and Dr. Wang's warning that a sharp shift in China's Korea policy is possible has significant implications for U.S. interests. Accordingly, this monograph warrants careful consideration.



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## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR**

**FEI-LING WANG** is an Assistant Professor at the School of International Affairs, Georgia Institute of Technology. Born in China, he graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1992 with a Ph.D. in political science and taught at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and the University of Pennsylvania. His research interests are comparative and international political economy, world politics and international relations, East Asia and China studies. He has published, in English and Chinese, in those areas.

## SUMMARY

To understand China's foreign policy in the 1990s and the true attitude of Beijing towards the military presence of the United States in Northeast Asia, one must examine China's perception of the alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK). Public statements aside, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has shifted its traditional position and has tacitly accepted, even welcomed, the continuation of the U.S.-ROK alliance. Beijing views the institutionalized presence of the Americans in Northeast Asia as a stabilizing force, serving China's interest of maintaining the favorable *status quo* in the region. However, continued acceptance is not guaranteed; developments in the Sino-American relationship and the course of reunification of the Korean Peninsula will affect attitudes in the future.

In order to discuss China's perception of the U.S.-Korean alliance, let us first examine China's general post-Cold War security policy, especially regarding Northeast Asia. As the century ends, Beijing, increasingly preoccupied with its own domestic agenda, has adopted a more conservative attitude (near-term) in Northeast Asia. In the post-Cold War era, international competition has shifted from the political and military to the economic arena. In this new *milieu*, Beijing displays a changed, even ambivalent, attitude towards the United States' political and military presence in Northeast Asia. American ground forces in Japan and South Korea and U.S. naval presence in the Western Pacific have now generally disappeared from China's list of complaints. Indeed, the United States is frequently regarded as a stabilizing force in the region, although Beijing watches carefully Washington's "hegemonic" moves.

The future of the political division on the Korean Peninsula is naturally of key importance to China's perception of the U.S.-ROK alliance. One can hardly observe much eagerness on China's part for a rapid reunification of



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Korea, although Beijing is somewhat sincere in supporting the idea of letting the Koreans themselves control the reunification process. To Beijing, a stable, peaceful and (hopefully) friendly, but perhaps divided, Korean Peninsula is more desirable than rapid reunification or a de-nuclearization of North Korea. Finally, as a result of China's overall security considerations, Beijing now appears to have quietly accepted the U.S.-ROK alliance as a part of the favorable *status quo* in Northeast Asia. Continued tacit acceptance, however, is not guaranteed. From the Chinese perspective, there seems to be an inherent conflict between a united Korea and a strong Korean-American alliance; if a united Korea maintains an alliance with the United States, Beijing may have to make a sharp policy shift. The key variables affecting China's perception of the U.S.-ROK alliance in the future, therefore, seem to be the overall Sino-American relationship and the development of the inter-Korean relationship.

## **TACIT ACCEPTANCE AND WATCHFUL EYES: BEIJING'S VIEWS ABOUT THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE**

### **The Chinese View of Post-Cold War Northeast Asia.**

Amidst the jubilation at the end of the Cold War, many Americans believed that the new, post-Cold War world would be more uncertain, and even more dangerous, than the previous decades.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the Chinese entered this new era with mixed feelings. On the one hand, Beijing publicly stated that a peaceful, golden era had arrived for China to modernize itself. On the other hand, a new transitional, multipolar world seemed to carry with it so many potential security threats and uncertainties that China should be vigilantly wary of any new hegemonic behavior on the part of other powers.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while relaxing in a secure post-Cold War world, "the most relaxed security posture since World War II,"<sup>3</sup> and seeking economic gains over political influence abroad, Beijing continues to watch carefully for potential security threats to its domestic political stability and its reunification of the Motherland.

China appears to be playing a subtle, yet familiar, balance of power game "with Chinese characters," aiming at preventing in the region expanded U.S. dominance or Japanese military resurgence, either of which would be viewed by Beijing as a major security threat. China's actions during the recent North Korean nuclear dispute demonstrate such an attitude. From that perspective, the PRC has behaved like a typical *status quo* power in Northeast Asia, and its foreign policy is expected to be rather conservative in the near future.

Even before the demise of the former Soviet Union and the sharp decline of Russian power, China started to reevaluate its security environment with a heavy emphasis on "reconfiguration" and competitions of "comprehensive national power" (*zonghe guoli*) among the nations. The

Chinese view of the world shifted from emphasizing the "hegemonic struggle" between the superpowers to focusing on "peace and development" in a multipolar world. Motivated by domestic needs and forced by the negative international responses to its handling of the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, Beijing adopted Deng Xiaoping's famous "sixteen-character" low profile approach in international relations. Chinese analysts now believe that an emerging "multipolarity helps stability and prosperity," at least in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>4</sup> They regard "the co-existence of China, Japan, Russia, and the United States without confrontation between them (as) something historically unprecedented."<sup>5</sup> Northeast Asia is now considered the most stable region in the post-Cold War world. A leading foreign policy adviser wrote recently that China enjoys "the best external environment since the establishment of the Peoples' Republic"; Beijing can now rightfully expect a "politically stable and economically fast-growing" Northeast Asia that is largely free from the danger of military conflicts.<sup>6</sup> Another Chinese researcher observed, "It is the first time that China has faced no direct military threat since 1949, possibly since the Opium War of 1840"; thus, "(g)enerally speaking, China is satisfied with its current security environment."<sup>7</sup> Most of the past security threats have largely gone and many of the old issues have been rather satisfactorily addressed.<sup>8</sup> Whatever long range security objectives or diplomatic ambitions they may have in Northeast and Southeast Asia, China's leaders appear to believe that time is on their side.

To Beijing, domestic political stability is the top security priority, and a stable and relaxed international security environment is indispensable to that goal.<sup>9</sup> Domestic political stability for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rests, albeit indirectly, on rapid economic development. Therefore, economic programs may take precedence over military and diplomatic goals. At the 14th Congress of the CCP in 1992, Jiang Zemin called for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to "consciously subordinate itself to the overall interests of national economic development."<sup>10</sup>

A key component in that economic development is East Asia. In 1992, China's trade with the region comprised nearly two-thirds of its total foreign trade.<sup>11</sup> Chinese trade with East Asia grows at a higher than average rate (23 percent in 1991 compared to 17.6 percent growth overall).<sup>12</sup> Japan has been one of China's largest trade partners (surpassing even Hong Kong in 1993)<sup>13</sup> and a major source of technology and capital. The PRC-ROK economic relationship got a big boost in 1992 when the two established full diplomatic relations; the bilateral trade volume in 1991-92 jumped 56 percent<sup>14</sup> and has scored an average annual growth rate of 37 percent for the past three years. In 1994, the PRC-ROK trade reached an all-time high of US \$11.66 billion (US \$7.7 billion the first half of 1995).<sup>15</sup> Seoul expects China, now its third largest trading partner, to become its largest by the year 2000.<sup>16</sup> China has already become the largest recipient of the ROK's foreign investment; by the end of 1993, South Korea had invested in 2,332 Chinese projects, worth US \$2.13 billion. The Chinese also established about 40 projects in the ROK worth US \$11 million.<sup>17</sup> Since 1992, Beijing has also largely transformed its former economic "assistance" to North Korea into a rather profitable trade relationship.<sup>18</sup>

A second major Chinese security concern in East Asia is the reunification of China. Ever since the CCP took power in 1949, Taiwan has been a security problem to Beijing, both real and imagined. Sometimes the PRC has appeared over-sensitive, fearing that a foreign intervention would encourage Taiwan's drive for independence, and thus directly endanger China's territorial integrity and national security. On the one hand, to reunite the Motherland is viewed as a mandate of history that must not be compromised. Beijing's sole legitimate rule over China must not be challenged. On the other hand, a foreign-backed, independent Taiwan is likely to compel Beijing to use force to bring it under control, thus leading to a costly military conflict which would drain funds needed for modernization. Actually, to Beijing, Taiwan would not have been such a problem had there not been foreign forces involved, beginning with Japan's annexation of the island nearly 100

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years ago.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, as Qian Qichan has noted, Beijing “does not have any room for maneuver” on the Taiwan issue because this is directly related to the fundamental interest of the Chinese nation, and this issue has been the most important obstacle to the smooth development of the Sino-American relationship.<sup>20</sup> The recent Sino-American conflict over the visit of Taiwan’s president, Lee Tung-Hui, to his American alma mater (Cornell University) illustrates Beijing’s sensitivity and concern over the possibility of foreign involvement in its dispute with Taipei. As long as Taipei restrains its ambition of independence, however, Beijing appears not to be in a hurry to reunify rapidly, perhaps violently.<sup>21</sup>

In short, Beijing now is cautious about any new developments which may alter the *status quo* in East and Northeast Asia. From a geopolitical perspective, the United States and Japan are the only two world-class players who could cause new security concerns for China in this region, by means of a dominant U.S. power pursuing “hegemonic” policies there and an armed aggressive Japan. Beijing might feel very insecure, for historically justifiable reasons, if it had to accede to American domination or Japanese leadership. The PRC also worries deeply about potential support for Taiwan’s drive for independence from a still powerful United States or from a Japan restored to political/military power. Either could jeopardize any diplomatic goals China may have for the future. Therefore, veiled comments by leading Chinese military strategists that “hegemonism of the superpower(s) is still the long-term threat to the regional security” and may pose new security challenges to the PRC in the future hint that the “competing United States and Japan” are those “superpowers” or “regional superpowers.”<sup>22</sup> Although Japan now is a friendly neighbor and the United States is basically viewed as a stabilizing power in Northeast Asia, Beijing nonetheless plays a subtle, yet familiar, game of “using barbarians against barbarians” (*yiyi zhiyi*) against a perceived, developing threat. Aiming at “preventing the situation in which a major power dominates the region,”<sup>23</sup> China hopes to “take a neutral stance towards the conflicts among the

United States, Japan and Russia" because it is desirable "for China to maintain an equilibrium among America, Japan and Russia."<sup>24</sup>

### **The Chinese Policy Towards the U.S. Presence in Northeast Asia.**

From the end of the Korean War until the 1980s, Beijing was always a very strong critic of the American military presence in South Korea and Japan. Such rhetoric was especially harsh when the possibility of renewed military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula erupted or when incidents occurred that might escalate into conflicts between the United States and North Korea. Beijing labeled TEAM SPIRIT exercises "provocative," "aggressive," or "imperialistic" actions. Starting in the 1970s, however, Beijing began to tone down its criticisms of stationing in Japan American forces whose strategic objective was to counter the former Soviet Union. It did continue its criticism of the U.S.-ROK alliance, mainly because of its own alliance with Pyongyang.

By the end of 1989, however, the world had changed. Beijing witnessed the sudden collapse of the mighty Soviet Empire with complicated feelings and deep emotions.<sup>25</sup> The disappearance, at least for the time being, of China's Number One Threat to the north altered much of its security picture in Northeast Asia. Potential security threats were now more likely from different sources, such as the United States and Japan.

China's fear of a restoration of Japanese political leadership and military power weighs much more heavily. Prevention of a new Japanese militarism is now a high security priority of Beijing.<sup>26</sup> The Chinese press has always been very watchful on any signs that might suggest a restoration of militarism in Japan. Every August *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*) ridicules and criticizes Japanese officials who pay their "homage" to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine.<sup>27</sup> During the highly publicized 50th anniversary celebration of V-J Day in August 1995, China's

top leaders all condemned the Japanese refusal to make sincere apologies and draw "the lessons of history." To most of the ordinary Chinese, what the Japanese did to China half a century ago is a horrendous crime that cannot be forgiven. A strong anti-Japanese sentiment is still easily observed in China today. China's leaders still call upon its people to "never forget" Japanese war crimes.<sup>28</sup> The Chinese openly regarded Tokyo's "Official Resolution on World War II" (passed by the Japanese Diet in June of 1995) as being far from a sincere apology and, thus, yet another example of the influence of powerful "right-wing" forces in Japan which seek to "cover up the past."<sup>29</sup> Like the Koreans, Beijing always responds quickly to any comments by Japanese officials that may be interpreted as "revising" history and glossing over Japan's past militarism and aggression. Chinese military leaders have expressed strong doubts about Tokyo's intentions in post-Cold War East Asia. They believe that Japan's ability to project power must be monitored carefully.<sup>30</sup> As Jiang Zemin stated publicly in September 1995, China must keep "severe criticisms and high vigilance" towards the possible restoration of the Japanese militarism.<sup>31</sup> Although one may interpret Beijing's criticisms of Japan as a convenient excuse for its own military growth, China's fear of a militarily-powerful Japan appears genuine and deep.<sup>32</sup>

Having lost a major balancing power in Northeast Asia with the collapse of the Soviet Union and faced with addressing Japan's need to possess secure sea lanes without allowing Tokyo to have a mighty military machine, Beijing genuinely, but quietly, prefers a continuation of the American military presence in the region, mainly in Japan and South Korea. China now seems to have accepted the notion that Washington can be a credible balancing force to stop Japan's possible (and dangerous) leadership aspirations in East Asia. Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, for example, stated publicly in 1993 that traditionally, in principle, China does not support any major power stationing its troops abroad. But, the issue (of American military presence in Japan and South Korea) is a legacy of the past and needs to be solved gradually.<sup>33</sup> Beijing's

criticism of the American military presence in Japan, South Korea and the Western Pacific have all but disappeared. Despite domestic, anxiety-provoking calls for a reduction of American military force in Asia, Beijing actually expects the United States to retain forces in East Asia in the "short and medium-term."<sup>34</sup> The U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which they believe will remain in effect at least until early in the next century, will continue to restrain any significant growth of the Japanese military power. China thus regards the United States as a "less harmful devil," which it can "use" to suppress Japan's desires for military power and political leadership. To achieve that goal, Beijing tacitly approves the American military presence in the whole West Pacific.

### **The Two Koreas in the Eyes of Beijing.**

The Chinese have had a deep and unique feeling about the Koreans. The close relationship resulting from the tributary system linked the two for more than one thousand years. Under its Confucian, family-like "international" system, China historically repressed Korean independence, but rarely intervened in Korean domestic affairs. Despite the fact that Korea was China's tributary nation for centuries, very few Chinese really believed that Korea was ever a part of "China," as opposed to their attitude toward Tibet, Xinjiang or even Mongolia. For more than 500 years, threatened by Japanese piracy and military aggression, Korea's security was tied to that of China; that ended when China failed to save the Yi dynasty from Korean peasants and the Japanese military in 1895-1896. That loss directly led to the downfall of the Chinese Empire itself. Nevertheless, the close bonds of history and culture remained.

That bond seemed especially close between the PRC and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), linked (it would appear) by a common devotion to Leninist-Stalinist communism and a shared experience fighting the Japanese in World War II. That bond grew even stronger when the Korean War pitted the two directly against the United States and its allies. For historical, ideological,



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geopolitical, and strategic reasons, therefore, Beijing called the North Koreans “comrades and brothers,” who shared a “unbreakable friendship cemented with blood” and tested by time.<sup>35</sup> Other than the occasional, but generally discreet, conflict, such as North Korea’s alleged territorial demands and Pyongyang’s annoying vacillation between competitors Moscow and Beijing, Kim Il-Sun remained the sole, lasting communist comrade of Beijing throughout the Cold War. In the 1990s, after the collapse of the former USSR, China became North Korea’s main supplier of most goods, including food and energy. Even by the mid-1990s, when the DPRK suffered huge defaults in trade payments, Beijing continued to supply Pyongyang.<sup>36</sup> The PRC apparently hoped that the DPRK could be economically more sustainable and, thus, “have a positive influence in safeguarding peace and stability on the Peninsula” by pursuing Chinese-style economic reforms and opening up society. The establishment of the Najin-Sonbong Free Economic Zone (NSFEZ) in North Korea was, therefore, highly regarded by the Chinese press.<sup>37</sup> A border thoroughfare was reopened in the Fall of 1995 to allow the Chinese merchants in Jilin Province easier access to the NSFEZ across the Tumen River.<sup>38</sup> Beijing generally traditionally refrains from commenting on the domestic affairs of the DPRK other than praising the “eternal friendship” between Beijing and Pyongyang and offering needed assistance.

Beijing’s attitude toward South Korea has not been totally hostile. Notwithstanding the fact that the ROK was an enemy of the PRC during the Korean War and the entire Cold War era, Beijing has always believed, or pretended to believe, that the South Koreans were somehow victims themselves, pawns of American aggression. Other than the “handful of Korean reactionaries controlled” by the United States, China never actively disliked the ROK—as it did some “walking dogs” of the former USSR and the United States. Indeed, some small practices have even been used to prove continued *detente*. The fact that South Korea, paradoxically perhaps, kept more Chinese characters in its language than the DPRK has often been used by many in

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China as evidence to show the bonds and friendship between China and the ROK. Seoul's "economic miracle" in the 1970s and 1980s greatly altered China's view of the ROK. When China started its *own* economic reform, South Korea became a major source of practical "lessons-learned," as well as concrete "foreign assistance."<sup>39</sup> Their rapidly-growing bilateral cooperation has now extended even to sensitive, high-tech areas such as nuclear power projects. Seoul is reported to have successfully signed contracts to build nuclear reactors for China by mid-1995.<sup>40</sup> South Korea is now generally regarded by the Chinese government and people as an admirable and friendly neighbor that is determined, prosperous, reasonable, and cooperative. In the balance-of-power game aimed at the Japanese and the Americans, both Koreas are generally considered to be in the same camp as the Chinese. Beijing believes that all three share victimization by America's annoying "human rights" policies in Asia; Washington's notion of human rights, its advocates argue, is undesirable and offensive throughout the whole East Asian region.<sup>41</sup>

By most criteria, the DPRK is a major victim of the ending of the Cold War, while the ROK emerged a major winner. Thus, Pyongyang's fear for its own political survival and its self-help efforts (including its nuclear ambitions) seem reasonable, even justifiable, to the PRC leaders. China does not strive for the success of one over the other; instead, it has worked to achieve an overall balance and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Thus, while it increases its political and, especially, economic ties with the ROK, it maintains the stability of the DPRK. This Chinese-style, balance-of-power strategy in Northeast Asia was clearly illustrated by Beijing's policy towards the North Korean nuclear issue. The stability of the *status quo* on the Peninsula, not a decisive American victory over the DPRK, seems to be the goal of the PRC. The subsequent development of the North Korean nuclear issue appears, so far, to satisfy China since Pyongyang agreed to stop its nuclear program, while the United States and the ROK began to inject much needed resources to stabilize the Kim Jong-Il regime.<sup>42</sup>

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To deter the possible restoration of Japanese militarism and cope with a resurgent United States forcefully advocating its version of human rights and political democracy in Northeast Asia, in the absence of credible Russian power, China is likely to continue its balance-of-power strategy on the Korean Peninsula, supporting a “separate but equal” policy in the near term. Since the early 1990s, the Chinese press has spent equal time reporting the activities and exchanges between the PRC and each of the two Koreas. A closer look reveals that the greatest activities between the PRC and the ROK, however, have been mainly in the areas of economy, while the officially-reported, frequent exchanges between Beijing and Pyongyang have largely been visits of officials and former Chinese “Volunteers.” China would have the maximum strategic leverage on the Peninsula if the two Koreas were peacefully co-existing, but separated. Li Ruihuan, a top CCP leader, told the visiting ROK politician, Kim Tae-Chung, in the Fall of 1995, that,

China hopes that the Korean Peninsula would maintain peace and stability, . . . (thus to allow) both the south and north sides of the Korean Peninsula to create a favorable atmosphere for the final realization of peaceful reunification.<sup>43</sup>

Like many Koreans themselves in the ROK, Beijing does not wish for a rapid reunification of Korea at the expenses of the stability and strategic maneuverability of the *status quo*. Rapid reunification of the Peninsula is not a certainty for, as some Chinese scholars believe, it would require a major political change in North Korea.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, for obvious reasons, Beijing does not want to see its Northeastern provinces overwhelmed by a refugee flood caused by a sudden collapse of the Pyongyang regime.<sup>45</sup> As one analyst noted,

reunification without incurring instability will serve the interests of all parties concerned. Copying of the “German model” is not realistic . . . (and) it is difficult to confine the instability in the North (Korea) to North only.<sup>46</sup>

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Furthermore, as South Korean scholars observed, Korean reunification will likely reduce the American presence in East Asia and "greatly increase" the Japanese influence which is not in the interest of the PRC.<sup>47</sup> Other than strengthening itself in the global "competition of comprehensive national power," China will constantly search for buffer zones and counter-weights against major powerful competitors like Japan and the United States.<sup>48</sup> The long-time "comrades" in Pyongyang and the rich, vigorous, friendly and very "Asian" ROK would be of great help in executing this strategy, for they, too, share this fear of Japan. Indeed, the PLA noted in 1994 that Seoul has now put Japan ahead of the PRC and DPRK as a potential security threat.<sup>49</sup>

### **Chinese Perception of the U.S.-ROK Alliance.**

Traditionally, the PRC feels insecure and often reacts forcefully to any neighbor's military alliance with a major "external" power. The costly war China waged against Vietnam in 1979 was clearly motivated, to a great extent, by its fear of the Vietnamese-USSR alliance formed a year earlier.<sup>50</sup> The U.S.-ROK alliance was for a long time viewed by Beijing as a hegemonic, if not straightforward imperialist, tool of Washington to control East Asia. U.S. nuclear forces and the TEAM SPIRIT exercises were the main targets of Beijing's criticisms.

But, China's perception began to change as it started its internal reforms, a process which accelerated as the Cold War drew to an end. Beijing began to gradually and quietly accept (and even like) the U.S.-ROK alliance for its utility in stabilizing the Korean Peninsula and constraining the Japanese. But, China's continued tacit acceptance of the alliance is not guaranteed. China's perception appears to be conditioned by overall Sino-American relations, Beijing's own regional security interests, and the interactions between the two Koreas.

Current international relations in Northeast Asia are built around the "quadrangular" relationship between the

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United States, Japan, China and Russia.<sup>51</sup> Their improved relationship may have directly contributed to the political *detente* and increased economic contacts between the two Koreas since late 1980s. The likelihood of a new war between the two Koreas, thus, has declined. China now is on the best terms in over a century with the other three great powers and feels an immediate security threat from none of them. Better still for the Chinese, “(a)mong the four powers (United States, Russia, Japan and China), China is the only country that currently has good relations with both North and South Korea.”<sup>52</sup>

This historically unprecedented situation increases Chinese confidence and gives it more room to maneuver in Northeast Asia. The fast-growing economic tie between Seoul and Beijing form a solid base for the PRC-ROK relationship. The 34-year-old “Sino-Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance” serves as a formal alliance between China and the DPRK. In such a situation, the U.S.-ROK alliance (including its military component) seems significantly less threatening to China’s national security. Since the military alliance between Seoul and Washington is a major component of the favorable *status quo* Beijing now enjoys in Northeast Asia, it is not a surprise to see that China now rarely mentions, let alone objects to, the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Tacit acceptance does not mean public endorsement, however. The PRC’s version of international ethics, including its prohibition on stationing troops on foreign soil and its standing commitments to Pyongyang, prevent Beijing from openly praising such a military alliance. Tacit acceptance also does not keep Beijing from censuring American actions. Washington is often publicly criticized for still operating in the “Cold War mode,” e.g., using rhetoric assailing “communists,” including (naturally) the CCP.<sup>53</sup> Some in Beijing reproach Washington and the American press for retaining a “Cold War Syndrome” or “hegemonic psychology” that twists U.S. foreign policy and poisons the Sino-American relationship.<sup>54</sup> Beijing may now empathize with Pyongyang’s feeling of being “cornered” by the United

States after the Cold War. "Aftereffects of the Cold War,"<sup>55</sup> such as using economic sanctions to destabilize ideological enemies, may indeed look like an American attempt to "roll back" the Korean Peninsula—something the Chinese would definitely be alarmed by. The increasingly chilling atmosphere between Beijing and Washington since 1989 only deepens China's suspicion of the United States' *real* intention in East Asia. Some Chinese analysts openly argue that the United States sees China as "the main target of Westernization," implying that Washington could be working to undermine the political stability of the PRC.<sup>56</sup> The recent disputes over Taiwan have led many Chinese to argue that Washington may have become a right wing-dominated, aggressive power that seeks to weaken—even destroy—the PRC.

Beijing watches carefully the potential security threat from a resurgent United States. Many Chinese analysts believe, therefore, that the Korean Peninsula is potentially an arena for renewed struggle between the United States and the PRC. As one analyst noted,

The Korean Peninsula issue is no longer a simple dispute between South and North Korea; the different attitudes of China and United States on the North Korean nuclear issue are, essentially speaking, a strategic trial of strength between the two countries on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>57</sup>

A resurgent United States threatens to limit the influence of China in the post-Cold War World.

The United States . . . wants to contain China, regarding China's unification, development, and growing strength as 'potential threats' to the American hegemony . . . because the United States does not have a sufficient understanding of the accelerating trend towards multipolarization in the post-Cold War world.<sup>58</sup>

China's attitude towards the U.S.-ROK alliance ebbs and flows with the U.S.-PRC relationship. When relations with Washington are cordial, Beijing can tacitly accept the alliance. But, if Beijing suspects that Washington is using its military ties with Seoul to pursue its "hegemonic" policies

in East Asia, e.g., to limit China's options in the South China Sea or in Taiwan, Beijing could easily lean toward the DPRK's position and make the U.S.-ROK alliance a major issue in Sino-American and PRC-ROK relations. China could substantially strengthen its own alliance with North Korea and more overtly encourage the belligerence of Pyongyang.

Beijing fears that if the United States is allowed to have its way every time in Northeast Asia, it could eventually dominate the region, much like the situation in the Caribbean. In such a case, Beijing would find itself in a very poor security environment given its determination to sustain its political system and reunify the country. American dominance in East Asia, although unlikely at the moment, appears to be a major long-term concern to Beijing, which will continually factor in Beijing's attitudes toward the U.S.-ROK alliance.

By the mid-1990s, when the PRC seemed to have shifted its immediate military attention to Southeast Asia, particularly to the South China Sea islands and to the Taiwan Straits,<sup>59</sup> the U.S.-ROK alliance was still viewed as a stabilizing mechanism, thus acceptable and even favorable to Beijing, that ensured that no security problems would arise in Northeast Asia to disturb the Chinese actions in the south. Whether Washington would (or could) use those U.S. forces in South Korea to intervene against possible Chinese military actions in the south, such as a naval blockade against Taiwan, remains a major security concern to the Chinese.

A strong U.S.-ROK alliance may indeed contribute to a new American containment strategy against China and, thus, affect China's future pursuits and options. As one Chinese analyst recently concluded,

It is impossible that China will lie there motionless forever (as Napoleon allegedly suggested almost two hundred years ago). The 1.2 billion Chinese people, who are their own masters, want to develop and move on. This is a historical trend that nobody can hold back. . . . The "theory of containing China" will not get much popular support and is doomed to failure.<sup>60</sup>

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Another major variable affecting China's perception of the U.S.-ROK alliance is the inter-Korean relationship. In order to preserve the favorable *status quo* in Northeast Asia, Beijing is reluctant to endure a "crash unification" of North and South Korea (similar to that experienced by the two Germanies) or U.S. military-backed international sanctions that could provoke a new war on the Peninsula.<sup>61</sup> An important factor in Beijing's calculation about the U.S.-ROK alliance may be its desire to "protect" its North Korean comrades. Ever since the end of the Cold War, Beijing has expressed disappointment and unhappiness over the U.S. and Japanese decisions not to establish full diplomatic relations with Pyongyang—long after Moscow and Beijing recognized Seoul. According to Chinese press and academia, American behavior towards North Korea in the 1990s actually matches quite well the Chinese description of "hegemonic power," a buzzword for security threat and international enemy. With a different agenda, perspective, and perhaps intelligence collection, Beijing naturally does not share as deeply American concerns over Pyongyang's drive for nuclear weapons and a potential, explosive southward invasion from the DPRK. Beijing easily deems active American actions in South Korea as "unnecessary" and "hegemonic" moves that may actually harm Chinese interests. Unless there is continued, further improvement of the U.S.-DPRK relationship, Beijing will likely be cautiously critical about the U.S.-ROK alliance on occasion; the alliance-like close relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang is likely to continue to balance the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

Finally, the Chinese perception of the U.S.-ROK alliance is tightly linked to the issue of Korean reunification. The PRC's tacit acceptance of the U.S.-ROK alliance apparently is only valid under the current framework of international relations in Northeast Asia. Beijing would clearly feel very uncomfortable and insecure if a united Korea or a unifying Korea maintained an effective military alliance with the United States.



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When jointly considering the U.S.-ROK alliance and the course of Korean reunification, the PRC appears to have a hierarchy of preferences. The best scenario would be a non-threatening U.S.-ROK alliance on the divided, but stable, Korean Peninsula to maintain the favorable *status quo*. This is exactly the current situation after the China-desired solution of the North Korean nuclear issue. The second choice would be a gradual, but peaceful, reunification of the two Koreas with an unambiguous demise of the U.S.-ROK alliance—especially its military components. The PRC may obstruct such a peaceful reunification if it meant a total disappearance of the DPRK regime. A less desirable outcome would be a military withdrawal of the United States from South Korea without a rapid Korean reunification. The reduction of the American presence would encourage the rise of Japan, but the divided (yet stable) Korean Peninsula could still function as a buffer for the PRC. The least desirable situation would be a rapid Korean reunification of the whole Peninsula with a continued strong U.S.-ROK alliance, which China would regard as a direct security threat.

Such a hierarchy of preferences makes the Chinese policy towards the Korean reunification and the U.S.-ROK alliance a complex and perplexing one. From the Chinese perspective, there seems to be a fundamental conflict between accepting a U.S.-ROK alliance and supporting Korean reunification. This deeply rooted security concern is likely to make the gap between Beijing's words and the deeds regarding Northeast Asia more apparent in two ways. On the one hand, the PRC works to maintain the *status quo*, but needs to voice its "full support" to its ally, North Korea, which at least publicly argues for an immediate American withdrawal from South Korea. On the other hand, struggling with its own reunification course, Beijing prefers the U.S.-ROK alliance and a divided Korea, but is compelled publicly to "encourage" the drive for Korean reunification (which may result in a threatening Korean-American alliance covering the whole Korean Peninsula). The PRC recently, however, has expressed interest in the possibly changing nature of the U.S.-ROK alliance from a dependent

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relationship to a partnership. In addition to the growing American domestic cries for reducing the U.S. security commitment in East Asia, increasingly many Koreans have argued for a more “democratic” or “equal” partnership between Seoul and Washington to serve the changed interests of the ROK in the post-Cold War era.<sup>62</sup> Such demands are likely to alter the nature of the U.S.-ROK alliance in the years to come following reunification. The military components of the alliance, for example, could be significantly reduced, and Seoul might acquire more control of the alliance. Some in the PLA, for example, believe changes in such a direction would benefit the region and the Peninsula,<sup>63</sup> since a greater Korean say in the U.S.-ROK alliance may result in a less-likely American threat.

## **Conclusion.**

China is satisfied with current Northeast Asian international relations. However, it watches for new threats—mostly likely in the form of an external, dominating power in East Asia or revived Japanese militarism. Limited by its own capacity, the PRC is likely to play the old balance of power game to maintain a favorable *status quo*. On the Korean Peninsula, China does not want rapid change or stalemate. Despite China’s suspicions and doubts, the United States is currently viewed by Beijing as an effective means to maintain the security arrangement in Northeast Asia. For China’s short-term security objectives, the Americans are welcomed (and even encouraged) to continue their military presence in South Korea to constrain the Japanese. But, a United States that aggressively promotes human rights and political democracy is deeply feared by Beijing as a long-term challenge to the political stability of the CCP regime. U.S. policies towards Taiwan, driven by domestic politics, touch even more sensitive nerves in Beijing. The recent Chinese taciturn consent to the presence of the Russian naval forces in the Pacific may indicate that Beijing is preparing an alternative to American help in balancing Japan. The double security objective of using and resisting the United States in East Asia appears to be

China's dominant perception of the American presence in this region in general and the U.S.-ROK alliance in particular.

Beijing accepts and even tacitly likes the U.S.-ROK alliance, as long as it remains a bilateral alliance with the simple aim of deterring external aggression against the ROK. The Chinese Foreign Minister recently (and openly) termed the formerly much-criticized U.S.-ROK military relationship as merely something "the Americans are now discussing among themselves."<sup>64</sup> That is, it is basically an American and South Korean issue under the current international structure in Northeast Asia. China would not mind this alliance at all. Given our understanding of China's security concerns in East Asia, however, any alteration of the purpose, content, or scope of the U.S.-ROK alliance would necessarily cause Beijing to reassess its position. China accepts a U.S.-ROK alliance in a divided Korea, but a united Korea with a continued Korean-American military alliance would be very undesirable to Beijing. The key variables affecting China's perception of the U.S.-ROK alliance in the future, therefore, seem to be the overall Sino-American relationship and the development of the inter-Korean relationship.

## ENDNOTES

1. John J. Mearsheimer, for example, is known for his views. See also Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1, 1990/91, pp. 23-33.

2. For a recent general assessment of the overall international relations, see Yan Xuetong and Li Zhongcheng, "Zhanwang 21 Shijicu de Guoji Zhengzhi" (Looking Ahead at the International Politics at the Early 21st Century), *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi (Contemporary International Relations (henceforth CIR))*, Beijing, No. 6, 1995, pp. 2-8.

3. Shen Qurong, "Security Environment in Northeast Asia: Its Characteristics and Sensitivities," *CIR*, Vol. 2, No. 12, December 1992, p. 13.

4. Li Zhongcheng and Guo Chuanling, "World Trends 1993," *CIR*, Vol. 3, No. 1, January 1993, p. 4.

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5. Geng Huichang, "Multi-National Co-Ordination: Feasibility in Asia-Pacific," *CIR*, Vol. 2, No. 11, November 1992, p. 11.
  6. Yang Chenxu, "Jiangxi Dongya Anquan Wenti" (An Analysis on East Asian Security Issues), *Guoji Wenti Yanju (International Studies)*, Beijing, No. 3, 1994, pp. 21, 19.
  7. Yan Xuetong, "China's Regional Policy," conference paper presented at the China at the Turn of the Century Conference, East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, August 3-5, 1994, pp. 2, 4.
  8. For a further discussion on this point, see Fei-Ling Wang, "Lengzhan Yihou Zhongguo de Dongya Anquan Zhengca Jianxi" (An Analysis on Chinese Security Policy in the Post-Cold War East Asia), *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Jikan (Chinese Social Sciences Quarterly)*, Hong Kong, No. 10, Spring 1995, *passim*.
  9. Deng Xiaoping's remarks to President George Bush in 1989. Deng Xiaoping, *Deng Xiaoping Wenxuan (Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping)*, Vol. 3, Beijing: Renmin Press, 1993, p. 284; Jiang Zemin, "To Accelerate the Reform and Opening," *Beijing Review*, October 26-November 1, 1992, p. 16.
  10. Jiang Zemin, "To Accelerate the Reform and Opening," p. 25.
  11. *The Far East and Australasia 1994*, 25th ed., London: Europa Publications Limited, 1994, p. 208.
  12. People's Republic of China (PRC) State Statistical Bureau, 92' *Zhongguo Fazhan Baogao (China Development Report 1992)*, Beijing: Tongji Press, 1993, p. 219.
  13. *Guoji Maoyi (International Trade Journal)*, Beijing, March, 1994, p. 50.
  14. PRC State Statistical Bureau, 92' *Zhongguo Fazhan Baogao*, p. 219.
  15. *Renmin Ribao-Overseas*, Beijing, September 12, 1995, p. 6.
  16. "New Directions of China-Korea Economic Cooperation," *East Asian Daily*, Seoul, Korea, April 15, 1994, p. 1.
  17. *Renmin Ribao-Overseas*, Beijing, September 12, 1995, p. 6.
  18. For example, North Korea now imports 75 percent of its oil supply, 72 percent of food imports, and 88 percent of cooking coal from China. *Time Magazine*, June 13, 1994, p. 27; "Border City's Trade with DPRK 'Severely Limited'," Hong Kong AFP News, in English, July 14,

1994, in *Daily Report, Foreign Broadcasting Information Service China* (henceforth *FBIS-CHI*)-94-135, July 14, 1994, p. 8.

19. "The Japanese Government Cannot Escape for the Blame," *People's Daily*, September 29, 1994, p. 8.

20. Qian Qichan, unpublished speech at the luncheon of the Foreign Affairs Council, New York, September 27, 1994.

21. See Fei-Ling Wang, "Taihai Niangan de Nengzhan yu Rezhan" (The Cold War and Hot War Across the Taiwan Straits), *Yazhou Zhoukan* (*Asian Weekly*), Hong Kong, August 6, 1995, p. 1.

22. Wu Guifu and Xia Liping, *Yatai Diqu Anquan Huanjin* (*Security Environment in Asia and the Pacific*), Beijing: PLA Press, 1995, *passim*.

23. Yang Chenxu, "An Analysis of East Asian Security Issues," p. 20.

24. Yan Xuetong, "China's Regional Policy, p. 16.

25. For a description of China's open and covert reactions to the demise of the former Soviet Union, see John W. Garver, "The Chinese Communist Party and the Collapse of Soviet Communism," *China Quarterly*, No. 133, March 1993, pp. 1-26.

26. Robert A. Manning, "Burdens of the Past, Dilemmas of the Future: Sino-Japanese Relations in the Emerging International System," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Winter 1994, pp. 45-58.

27. For example, see Gu Ping, "A 'Hot August' In Japan," *Renmin Ribao*, August 18, 1994, p. 8.

28. *Xinhua Daily Telegraph*, Beijing, August 17, 1995, p. 1.

29. Wei Li, "Yubao Pipa Banzhemian" (Covering-up Half the Face with a Pipa), *Shijie Zhishi* (*World Affairs*), Beijing, No. 13, July 1, 1995, pp. 2-3.

30. *Xiandai Jianchuan* (*Modern Maritime Vessels*), Beijing, 1994.

31. Jaing Zeming, "Zhai Jinian Fang Faxisi Zhangzheng Shengli Wushi Zhounian Dahui Shang de Jianghua" (Speech at the Meeting to Commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Victory of Anti-Fascism War), *Renmin Ribao-Overseas*, September 4, 1995, pp. 1, 4.

32. The Japanese government has not really helped to reduce that suspicion. On the contrary, some Japanese senior officials seemed to like the idea of being the "leader" of East Asia again at the expense of the

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Chinese and other East Asians. See, for example, the speech by Yuji Miyamoto, the Japanese Consul General to Atlanta, at the Southern Center for International Relations, Atlanta, Georgia, April 21, 1995.

33. *Renmin Ribao*, March 24, 1993, p. 1.

34. Qurong, "Security Environment," p. 8.

35. See Jiang Zemin's remarks to his DPRK guests on August 27, 1995. *Xinhua Daily Telegraph*, Beijing, August, 28, 1995, p. 1.

36. *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong, August 23, 1994, p. 8. A Japanese newspaper reported that China shipped food in late July as "emergency aid" to the post-Kim Il Sung regime. "PRC Sent Food to PDRK to 'Avert Economic Confusion'," Tokyo, *Mainichi Shimbun*, July 29, 1994, in *FBIS-CHI-94-147*, August 1, 1994, p. 9.

37. Ya Tai, "Guanghui de Lichen, Yongheng de Youyi" (Glorious Course, Eternal Friendship), *Renmin Ribao*, Beijing, September 3, 1995, p. 1.

38. *Jilin Ribao (Jilin Daily)*, Changchun, August 26, 1995, p. 1.

39. There have been rather open discussions on the "useful" lessons from the Korean case including the belief that "neo-Confucianism" played a major role in Korea's development. See, for example, Xin Guanjie, "Kongzi Rujia Xueshuo Xiang Shijie de Chuanbuo" (The Promotion of Confucianism to the World), *Renmin Ribao-Overseas*, April 27, 1995, p. 3.

40. *Zhongguo Hegongye Bao (Chinese Nuclear Industry Journal)*, Beijing, July 19, 1995, p. 2.

41. Hong Guoqi and Wang Xiaode, "Wenhua Yingshu Chubailiao Clinton de Yatai Zhengce" (Clinton's Asian-Pacific Policy is Thwarted by Cultural Factors), *CIR*, Vol. 5, No. 5, May 20, 1995, in *FBIS-CHI-95-156*, August 14, 1995, pp. 10-13.

42. For a more in-depth examination of the China's policy on the North Korean nuclear issue, see Fei-Ling Wang, "Chinese Security Policy in Northeast Asia," in Tae-Hwan Kwak and Edward A. Olsen, eds., *Northeast Asia in a Changing World*, Boulder, CO: Lynn Rienner Publishers, 1996, *passim*. Some of the views expressed in this paper are shared with those authors.

43. Jia Hao and Zhuang Qubing, "China's Policy towards the Korean Peninsula," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 32, No. 12, December 1992, p. 1152.

44. Yan Xuetong, "China's Regional Policy, p. 13.
45. Qurong, "China's Regional Policy," p. 13.
46. Young-Kyu Park, "Post-Unification Challenges" in Amos A. Jordan, ed., *Korean Unification-Implication for Northeast Asia*, Washington, DC: CSIS, 1993, p. 42.
47. By the summer of 1994, Beijing made an interesting change in its decade long position and stopped calling for a reduction of Russian naval forces in the Pacific. *Renmin Ribao*, July 26, 1994, p. 4.
48. Peng Zhengxiang and Xia Liping, *Shijie Junshi Da Qushi* (*Grand Trends of the World Military*), Beijing: National Defense University Press, 1994, p. 310.
49. "Qiao Receives Japanese 'China Tour' Delegation," Beijing, *Xinhua*, in English, October 27, 1995, in *FBIS-CHI-95-208*, October 27, 1995, pp. 9-10.
50. See Fei-Ling Wang, "The Motivation for 'Punishing Hanoi': a Reading of the People's Daily," unpublished conference paper, Conference on China and International Relations, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, June 20-23, 1987, *passim*.
51. The term was first used by Herbert Ellison in *Japan and the Pacific Quadrille*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987, *passim*; Harry Harding, *China and Northeast Asia: The Political Dimension*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988, *passim*; among others.
52. Chen Qimao, "The Role of the Greater Powers in the Process of Korean Reunification," in Amos A. Jordan, ed., *Korean Unification-Implication for Northeast Asia*, Washington, DC: CSIS, 1993, p. 78.
53. Shen Qurong, "U.S.'s Eight Misunderstandings and China's Reality," unpublished conference paper presented to the International Conference on Sino-American Relations, Bridgeport, CT, April 1993, pp. 2-20.
54. Tang Tianri, "Meiguo de Nengzan Zhonghezhen" (The Cold War Syndrome of the U.S.), *Laiowang* (*Outlook*), Beijing, July 24, 1995, p. 44. *Renmin Ribao* quickly carried an article that directly and harshly criticized the "queer" article in the July 31, 1995, issue of *Time Magazine* ("Why We Must Contain China"), *Renmin Ribao*, Beijing, August 4, 1995, p. 6.
55. Lu Zhongwei, "Security of Northeast Asia and Prospects for Multilateral Consultation," *CIR*, Vol. 2, No. 11, November 1992, p. 20.

56. Yang Chenxu, "An Analysis of East Asian Security Issues," p. 20. China would warn Washington to avoid such a policy or risk the consequences. "We would like to advise those Americans with an anti-China mentality to give up their anachronistic way of thinking and hegemonic psychology so that Cold War II can be avoided." Li Zhongcheng, "China's Relations with Major Powers," *CIR*, No. 7, July 20, 1995, in *FBIS-CHI-95-169*, August 31, 1995, pp. 4-8.

57. Jen Hui-Wen, "The Chinese-U.S. Strategic Trial of Strength on the Korean Peninsula," *Hsin Pao*, Hong Kong, April 8, 1994, p. 24.

58. Tang Tianri, "Meiguo de Nengzan Zhonghezhen" (The Cold War Syndrome of the U.S.), *Laiowang (Outlook)*, Beijing, July 24, 1995, p. 44.

59. Weixin Hu, "Beijing's Defense Strategy and the Korean Peninsula," *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, forthcoming 1995/96.

60. Lu Shi, "Zhuding Puomide Berimong" (A Daydream Doomed to be Shattered—Refuting the 'Theory of Containing China'), *Guangmin Ribao*, Beijing, August 25, 1995, p. 3.

61. A Hong Kong-based magazine made a similar speculation. Lo Chieh-An, "China and DPRK strives for Political Stability and Economic 'Break-away'," *Tang Tai*, Hong Kong, No. 41, August 15, 1994, pp. 57-58. A similar view is also found in another Hong Kong-based newspaper. Jen Hui-Wen, "Inside Story about China Briefing DPRK on How to Act," *Hsin Pao (Star Daily)*, Hong Kong, June 22, 1994, p. 2.

62. See, for example, Byung-joon Ahn, "The Future of Korea-U.S. Relations: Toward Regional Partnership," unpublished conference paper, Annual Conference of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, August 30-September 3, 1995. At the International Workshop on the U.S.-ROK Alliance, Seoul, Korea, October 5-7, 1995, many Korean participants expressed similar, and even stronger, views.

63. Peng Zhengxiang and Xia Liping, *Shijie Junshi Da Qushi (Grand Trends of the World Military)*, Beijing: National Defense University Press, 1994, pp. 311-316.

64. *Renmin Ribao*, March 24, 1993, p. 1. Similar statements were later repeated by the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman in 1994 and 1995.



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