

# China's Defense Against Post-unification Korea-US Alliance: Not at Yalu but Taiwan Strait

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**Abstract** China has long upheld a neutral, if not opposing, stance to Korean unification, a stance which could be largely defined as the political risks associated with the Republic of Korea (ROK)-US alliance and the stationing of US forces (USFK) in South Korea. Given South Korea's need to engage USFK forces, does it imply there would not be a complete resolution to the Korean conundrum and to the future status of the US-ROK alliance and the USFK forces? In the recent years, the Chinese has somewhat softened its stance and its support of South Korea's unification initiatives can be seen coming from the party, the military, and the political realm. Empirical evidence and logical inference from recent Chinese intellectual discourse have indicated that China's security concerns could possibly be allayed if there is a redefinition of the ROK-US alliance and the USFK in the context of defending Taiwan and if the Korean unification precedes China's.

**Keywords** Korean unification · ROK-US alliance · USFK · Yalu River · Taiwan Strait · Multilateral security arrangement

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## Introduction

China's policy toward Korean unification deserves more scrutiny for the unprecedented level of support that Chinese officials have recently rendered to South Korea's unification aspiration.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, or at least during the Cold War, Beijing had only expressed unilateral support for Pyongyang's unification schemes—the Koguryo Federation or the North's version of “one country, two systems” unification model. From the end of the Cold War to 2013—the period in which South Korean President Park Geun-hye and her Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping came into power—there were many empirical evidences that indicate a shift in China's unilateral support for more neutrality. Such a shift was distinctive in three aspects: (1) Beijing showed more apathy and greater restraints in taking sides with either Korea by merely repeating its policy principle of support for unification—“peaceful independent unification”; (2) China's unification support was seldom stated at the summits of Korean leaders when the Korean peninsula was caught in a nuclear crisis security situation (not even in the midst of the North's nuclear tests); and (3) Beijing broke the taboo in publicly addressing its support of Korean unification to the South Korean audience.<sup>2</sup>

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, Beijing's neutrality has seemingly begun to soften. Chinese officialdom—from the party, the legislature, and the military—have never seemed more willing, comfortable, open, and sympathetic to embracing the South's unification initiatives. Their support can be seen in specific schemes such as President Park's Trust-building Process on the Korean peninsula in 2013, the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative, and President Park's Dresden Declaration in March 2014.<sup>3</sup> China has also publicly concurred with President Park's prescription to

<sup>1</sup> From the Chinese Communist Party, Secretary General Xi Jinping for the first time publicly supported South Korean government's unification measure, i.e., trust-building process, at his meeting with President Park in March 2014 in the Netherlands where he “speaks highly of the trust-building process of the Korean Peninsula proposed by President Park.” “Xi Jinping Meets with President Park Geun-hye of the Republic of Korea,” Embassy of the PRC in Ireland, <http://ie.china-embassy.org/eng/zgxxw/t1141383.htm> (accessed September 7, 2015). Chinese top legislator, Zhang Dejiang, chairman of the Chinese National People's Congress, also openly expressed Chinese support for the same measure during his visit to Seoul in February 2014. “Zhang Dejiang: *Fandui hanhandao yonghe, zhichi hanbandao xinren jincheng* (Zhang Dejiang: Opposes Korean peninsula's nuclearization but supports Korean peninsula trust-building process),” *Yeonhap News*, February 20, 2014. From the Chinese military, open support came from Chinese Minister of Defense Chang Wanquan in his meeting with President Park when he said China “vowed to join forces with the South for the achievement of peaceful reunification.” “President Park emphasizes Chinese support for Korean reunification,” *Koreanet*, February 5, 2015, <http://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Policies/view?articleId=125471> (accessed March 5, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> For the first time, China's unification support was read to the South Korean audience by former Chinese President Hu Jintao in his speech at the South Korean National Assembly in 2005. “China's Hu Supports Eventual Korean Unification,” *Reuters*, November 17, 2005, [http://www.boston.com/news/world/asia/articles/2005/11/17/chinas\\_hu\\_says\\_supports\\_eventual\\_korean\\_unification/](http://www.boston.com/news/world/asia/articles/2005/11/17/chinas_hu_says_supports_eventual_korean_unification/) (accessed November 18, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> On China's support to the Trust-building process ([22], p. 4, [18], p. 99). China appraises President Park Geun-hye's Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative positively, *Yeonhap News*, May 9, 2013, <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2013/05/09/0200000000AKR20130509185500083.HTML?from=search> (accessed May 20, 2013); and “China voices support for Park's proposal on unification with N Korea,” *Yeonhap News*, April 3, 2014. Dresden's declaration was a speech to complement her earlier vision on the benefits of the unification by specifying so-called “three umbrella agendas” as the foundation for peaceful unification with the North: humanity, co-prosperity, and integration. Some specific measures included “joint economic development projects, the creation of the Northeast Asia Development Bank and cultural and educational exchanges with North Korea.” “President makes history in Dresden,” *Joong-Ang Daily*, March 29, 2014.

the benefits of Korean unification as “Dae-bak” or an “economic bonanza.”<sup>4</sup> Park argues that the unification will champion costs incurred and regional states can benefit handsomely from the unification.<sup>5</sup> Based on this conviction during her most recent trip to Beijing in September 2015, she eventually succeeded in getting Xi’s agreement to “work together (with South Korea) for a peaceful unification.”<sup>6</sup> China’s overtly supportive remarks have since invited pundits to question the integrity of its “ritualised calls for the peaceful independent unification of Korea.”<sup>7</sup> These calls are now seen as a meaningful indication of the different ways the unification is being perceived in Beijing [3].

Few discussions, however, have attempted to challenge the implication of China’s unprecedented overt support of South Korea’s unification initiatives. This article calls for a set of new propositions as opposed to conventional views of China’s opposition to the unification. This article argues that China’s recent explicit support for South Korea’s unification initiatives reflects a new development in its strategic thinking regarding North Korea. This strategic thinking indicates that China may not be as obsessed with North Korea’s geopolitical value as it used to.<sup>8</sup>

The following conventional views of Beijing’s stance on Korean reunification thus deserve further scrutiny: (1) China’s unwillingness to lose the strategic buffer zone in North Korea in the face of an alternative power structure which will heavily favor all regional states but China [34]; (2) its opposition to the advancement of the USFK to the Amnok River or “Yalu River” after unification [81]; and (3) its preference for the status quo or division as evidenced by its politically correct disclaimer of its role in the unification process.<sup>9</sup>

This article argues that the long-existing assumption of China’s stance is outdated and obsolete as it only fits the dynamics of international relations during the Cold War. This assumption discounts the changes in the geopolitical regional security environment in the 21st century and fails to incorporate the strategic implications of the

<sup>4</sup> A pioneering work on the benefits of Korean unification to China by [4]. The notion of “Dae-bak” was introduced in “Opening remarks by President Park Geun-hye at the New Year press conference,” <http://www.korea.net/Government/Briefing-Room/Presidential-Speeches/view?articleId=117043> (accessed January 7, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> “Unification may be jackpot: Park,” *Joong-Ang Ilbo*, January 7, 2014. For an extensive and detailed study on the benefits of Korean unification from both internal and external perspectives, see [32]. For a Chinese perspective, Zhang Wuanyi, “What Korean Reunification Means to China,” *Policy Forum Online*, The Nautilus Organization for Security and Sustainability, October 12, 2007, <http://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/what-korean-unification-means-to-china/> (accessed November 23, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> “Park’s drive for unification faces headwinds,” *The Korea Herald*, September 6, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Pollack, “Is Xi Jinping Rethinking Korean Unification?” A paper presented at the Third Korea Research Institute for Security-Brookings Joint Conference on “Cooperating for Regional Stability in the Process of Korean Unification: Contingency Preparations with the ROK-U.S. as Anchor” in Seoul, Korea, on January 20, 2015. Available at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/presentations/2015/01/20-xi-jinping-korean-unification-pollack> (accessed March 2, 2015); and [58].

<sup>8</sup> A contrary view is expressed in [28].

<sup>9</sup> Such argument was endorsed and reinforced when Chinese principles on Korean unification were recently reiterated in the Joint Statement following President Park and President Xi Jinping’s summit in 2014. <Zhonghua remin gongheguo he dahan minguo lianhe shengming [People’s Republic of China and Republic of Korea Joint Statement]>, Chinese Foreign Ministry webpage, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_chn/gjhdq\\_603916/gj\\_603916/yz\\_603918/1206\\_604234/1207\\_604246/t1171408.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/gjhdq_603916/gj_603916/yz_603918/1206_604234/1207_604246/t1171408.shtml), July 4, 2014 (accessed July 4, 2014). For a compilation of support statement on the Korean reunification by successive Chinese leaders from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, see ([8], pp. 21–24, [85], p. 141, [65] p. 59, [69], p. 168).

changes in the role, function, and character of the ROK-US alliance and USFK since the new millennium. These adjustments were made in accordance with a series of new strategic concepts that the USA has adopted, such as “strategic flexibility,” “forward deployment,” and “pre-emptive (surgical) strike.”

This article offers a set of new propositions based on recent Chinese academic discourse because of the lack of official views. China has since the end of the Cold War refrained from addressing publicly the question of US military forces (USFK) stationed in South Korea.<sup>10</sup> The scope of Chinese academic discourse under analysis will span from 2001, the year when the USA officially made fundamental changes and adjustments to its overseas military forces bases, to the present. Since 2001, the Chinese has been wary of the ROK-US alliance and the USFK in South Korea and their implications for its reunification efforts in the Taiwan Strait ([30], pp. 8–9). The discourse work reviewed in this article is mostly drawn from peer-reviewed Chinese academic journals, periodicals, and op-ed articles from China’s main media.

The analysis reveals that the function and aim of the USFK and ROK-US alliance have much to do with the security of the Taiwan Strait and not with their presence in its northeastern regional borders of China. The following section analyzes the cause of Chinese concerns regarding recent alignments in the 2001 ROK-US alliance. The next section will explore the strategic implications of the prospective realignment after the unification in light of US commitment to Taiwan’s security. The article will conclude with suggestions to the strategic considerations Beijing should incorporate into the establishment of a multilateral security arrangement which Beijing has proposed as an alternative to the alliance.

### **Problem with Conventional Thinking: No Longer About USFK in Yalu Areas**

There is admittedly no official Chinese reference that touches directly on the theme of this article. Thus, the one viable way to understanding China’s position on the post-unification status of the ROK-US alliance and the USFK is to draw references from Chinese discourses. Empirical studies of Chinese academic discourses could be useful for formulating a set of new hypotheses on the sources of Chinese concerns on these matters. An analysis of these discourses shows that the proposed hypotheses of this article significantly challenge the validity of the old paradigm—the narrowly defined Chinese concern of a prospective relocation of the USFK to the borders to deter it after Korean unification [23, 71, 80].

Firstly, the continued stationing of the USFK in a post-unified Korea may not prove fruitful to the USA as the USFK can no longer be deployed beyond the north of the 38th parallel and along China’s northeastern borders, a position which was initially meant to deter China. Furthermore, it will entail overwhelming political, economic, and

<sup>10</sup> Instead of using such words as “dissolving” or “dismantling” to describe China’s preference for the status of ROK-US alliance and the “complete withdrawal” of the USFK from the peninsula, the latest of official criticism on ROK-US alliance came in 2008. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Qin Gang called the alliance “an outdated historical legacy of the Cold War” just the day before former South Korean President Lee Myong-bak’s first official visit to Beijing. Source: Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Briefing, May 27, 2008.

financial costs for the USA, all of which will lead to the deliberation of the questions: Could China be deterred? Does China require deterrence from the USA? Does the USA see any potential of Chinese expansion after the unification? Are there any compelling factors that will force China to undertake a military drive in defense of its borders against a unified Korea?

All these factors might weaken the USA's justification for deploying its military forces in an economically and politically overwhelming adventure. Furthermore, the USFK's deployment to counter China requires US Congress' approval and the prospect for US Congress' approval may be uncertain due to budget constraints and possible domestic political demand for the return of the troops.<sup>11</sup> The deployment of the USFK to the Chinese borders following Korean reunification is thus not a certainty.

Secondly, the idea that the keeping of the USFK in the South until institutional arrangements to ensure the security of Korea have been made will pose a larger threat to Chinese security interests may hold only if the reunification of Korea happens before China-Taiwan unification; China will indeed be more sensitive to the USFK's post-unification purpose, role, and function that may extend beyond the peninsula, leading to the safe assumption that China will be extremely concerned with the USFK if the Korean unification happens before the Chinese unification.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, the negotiation of a partial withdrawal and readjustment of the USFK after Korean unification, and thereby the compromise of a triangular alliance of the US-Korea-Japan will<sup>13</sup> be a grave concern for the Chinese as it will heighten the possibility of a ROK-US-Japan combined action against China if an armed conflict in the Taiwan strait occurs ([48], pp. 16–17, [73], p. 155). China perceives the combined size of the USFK, the United States forces in Japan (USFJ), and the national military power of Korea and Japan as a serious threat to its military security interests,<sup>14</sup> its other "core interests," and its national sovereignty over current disputed territories.

These references offer new premises to the debate against conventional views of China's security concerns pertaining to the prospective role and function of the ROK-US alliance and the USFK in a unified Korea. Content analysis of the ongoing Chinese discourse shows how the focus of Chinese concerns is now shifting southward from the Yalu River region to the Taiwan Strait. Beijing's new take on the principal agent of the unification and the consequences of alliance realignment following the merger of North Korea with South Korea can be inferred as follows.

<sup>11</sup> Enormous pressure is expected to arise to severely reduce military spending in light of the absence of a clear and present threat to US strategic interests. See ([53], p. 12). Similar concern was also raised earlier by ([13], pp. 24–25, [44], p. 130).

<sup>12</sup> One transformation form of the USFK that is expected as a result of a reduction in size from two brigades to one will be defined by so-called "Interim Brigade Combat Team (IBCT)," which is "designed with specific operational and organizational capabilities and would be able to deploy rapidly and conduct early entry operations" of the region, implying East Asia in a broad context and/or Northeast Asia ([25], p. 127). Recited from Army Transformation Brief on the Interim Force by Major General Jim Grazioplene, October 17, 2000, <http://www.army.mil/usa/AUSA%20Web/PDF%20Files/IBCT%20Web%20with%20Notes.pdf> (accessed July 24, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Many foresee the loss of one of the two brigades and one of the two main operating air bases in Kunsan or Osan following the unification ([25], pp. 127–128, [31], p. 59).

<sup>14</sup> Such a posture by the USA, Japan and Korea will more likely be perceived by the Chinese as "a base for potential power play against China." [24].

First, the fact that China is concerned about the post-unification status of the ROK-US alliance and the USFK implies China's implicit acknowledgement that the reunification will happen under South Korea's lead.<sup>15</sup> China will thus be more concerned with a unified Korea's security orientation than with a large democratic and market economic state running adjacent to one of its longest borders.<sup>16</sup>

Second, the USFK will no longer be bounded by North Korea and the ROK-US alliance—which had prevented the USFK's actions in the region from being fully utilized to advance the interest of the USA ([60], p. 1). The USA has hoped for strategic flexibility (such as not being limited to forward deployments of the USFK in the ROK-US alliance), which has been unattainable as various forms of North Korean threats have substantially marginalized the degree of such flexibility.

Third, the continued stationing of the USFK in a unified Korea after the dissipation of the North Korea threat can potentially become a source of an actual US intervention by the USFK in a crisis along the Taiwan Strait.<sup>17</sup> For instance, the deployment of the USFK to the defense of Taiwan has remained impossible under the current alliance structure.<sup>18</sup> China's focus is thus mainly on the possibility of a US intervention in Taiwan when it comes to the USFK issue ([36], p. 68).

Paradoxically speaking, if China and Taiwan were unified, China will not disagree or even oppose to USFK presence in either a divided or a unified Korea.

## ROK-US Alliance Adjustment Since 2001 and China's Security Concerns

The Chinese understanding of the USFK and the Korea-US alliance historically went through three stages of change: Cold War, post-Cold War, and post-9/11 [12]. Reasons for the change in understanding can be seen in relation to the switch in Northeast Asian power structure, the change in Northeast Asian international relations, and the resultant changes in China's relations with its neighbors. Post-Cold War era could be further divided into two phases as the early post-Cold War years in the 1990s brought about fundamental changes to the international power structure, which brought changes to China's perception of other countries and influencing its diplomatic policies and strategies. The 21st century, as the second phase, saw the rise of China which brought about policy and strategy adjustments in its attempt to strengthen alliance relations [55].

<sup>15</sup> It was reported at the conclusion of President Park's first visit to Beijing in 2013 that President Xi "gave a message that Beijing would not refuse peaceful unification led by Seoul." "Chinese president vows to be 'good partner' in Korean reunification," *The Dong-A Ilbo*, June 29, 2013. Tisdall, Simon. "Wikileaks cables reveal China 'ready to abandon North Korea'," *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/nov/29/wikileaks-cables-china-reunified-korea> (accessed January 3, 2011); "Zhongguo keyi jieshou hanguo toyi chaoxian bandao [China can accept South Korea unifying the Korean peninsula]," *FT Zhongwenwang* [*Financial Times*-Chinese version], December 1, 2010, <http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001035811?full=y> (accessed January 3, 2011); "China, 'We Will Not Intervene if US Attacks North Korea,'" *Daily NK*, March 26, 2005; and ([44] p. 123, [42], p. 51).

<sup>16</sup> Some foresee that as many as 13 China's land borders will become beneficiaries of economic developments in North Korea, if it becomes economically open and viable [19, 56].

<sup>17</sup> Out of such concerns, Chinese discourse emphasizes that the USFK should stay within the confine of the Korean peninsula ([27], p. 33).

<sup>18</sup> In one observer's term, it is so-called the freedom of action ([44], p. 129).

During the first phase of the post-Cold War period, China had shown mixed responses about the alliance. While it extolled the effectiveness of the alliance in successfully capping Japan's aspiration to become a "normal state" through militarization ([68], pp. 3–5, [74], [63]), it was still regarded as a source of instability in the Korean peninsula security situation because it was seen as the driving force behind North Korea's search for nuclear weapons ([78], pp. 66–67, [35], pp. 214–218). In the context of Korean unification, Beijing still regarded the ROK-US alliance as one of the sources that had hampered unification efforts and demonstrated its firm conviction on two different occasions in the 1990s. One was during preparations for the Four-Party Talks from 1997 and another during meetings held from 1998 to 1999 ([38], pp. 81–83) leading to China's belief that the withdrawal of the USFK was necessary if the Armistice was to be replaced with a peace treaty.<sup>19</sup>

The concern of the Chinese government toward the ROK-US alliance has surfaced since 2001. After the 9/11 attack, the USA declared war against terror and recognized the importance of making adjustments to its military forces deployed overseas in order to respond adequately to the asymmetric capability of the terrorists [10]. In the Asia-Pacific, the importance of ROK-US alliance was highlighted by General Thomas Schwartz, former commander of United Nations Command (UNC)/Combined Forces Command (CFC) and commander of USFK, before the Senate Armed Services Committee in March 2001; he stated that the "USFK role in the future will transit to Northeast Asia regional security" ([25], p. 126).

The importance of the adjustment can be seen in <Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)> published in 2001 ([61], p. 25). Three years after the 2001 QDR, the Department of Defense submitted a <Strengthening US Global Defense Posture> report providing the detailed means to the application of the plans. The ground penetrating radar (GPR) of US forces overseas included newly established necessities, direction and planning of the purpose, characteristic, deployment, mission, task and function for the US forces, and strategy deployed globally [16]. In order to effectively and efficiently conduct the war on terror, the USA has emphasized pre-emptive strike capability, forward deployment, and strategic flexibility of US forces deployed overseas [61].

The strategy of relocating US forces around China's neighboring states began to surface in Washington in 2004 with implication for China's security environment. In this context, the adjustment of force function and the role of the USFK in accordance with the GPR had become a concern for China. The strategic relocation of the USFK coincided with the intention of the US-Japan new guideline of 1996 and the ROK-US strategic discourse starting in 2002. The focus in Seoul and Washington was on the basic framework of the ROK-US alliance against asymmetric threats from not only North Korea's WMD but also potential terrorism. The two allies capitalized on the opportunity to justify and legitimize their expansion of the foundation of their cooperation to incorporate strategic interests beyond the peninsula ([37], p. 61). To this end, the decision was made to enhance the USFK's strategic flexibility, forward deployment, and pre-emptive strike capability.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> When North Korea first introduced the question of USFK's withdrawal as a formal discussion agenda at the fourth round of the Four-Party Talks, Chinese representatives did not oppose it, maintaining silence, which alluded to their acquiescence [40].

<sup>20</sup> A possible surgical strike at North Korea's nuclear facility in Yongbyon was first mentioned by a US official, then advisor to Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, Richard Perle, on June 11, 2003. "US should prepare to strike Yongbyon facility," *Joong-Ang Ilbo*, June 12, 2003.

Firstly, the notion of “strategic flexibility” was introduced to the USFK with follow-up measures after 2 years of negotiation in 2003 and 2004. It started in December 2002 with the negotiation of the relocation of USFK military bases. In its “Future of the Alliance Policy Initiative” report published in October 2003, the US government articulated strategic flexibility in more specific terms. After 12 rounds of negotiation, South Korea and the USA signed the first agreement on the relocation of the USFK in November 2005 to be effective the following year. The motivation behind the enhancement of strategic flexibility for the USFK was due to concerns from the following contingency scenarios: (1) a possible crisis in the Taiwan Strait; (2) possible North Korea’s aggression with nuclear weapons; and (3) the necessity of cooperation between Korea-Japan-USA against sudden changes within North Korea ([10], p. 17). All these contingencies provide an imminent direct linkage to the security and strategic interests of China with the Chinese government having negative perception of the ROK-US alliance’s defense maneuvers.

The impetus behind this transition resulted in the shift in US military strategic orientation from threat defenses to counterattack capability ([39], p. 51) which refers to not only the capability of the USA alone but also that of the alliance. The Chinese government estimated that as the war on terror demanded that South Korea make a greater contribution to the cause, rejecting this demand could lead to strategic pressure from the USA on its alliance commitment [70]. China’s assessment proved to be correct as it was a foregone conclusion that despite a year-long domestic debate South Korea would not do anything to undermine the alliance.

In 2004, the USA deployed 3600 US troops from the USFK to Iraq; as an ally, South Korea had no choice but to accept the new strategic characteristic of the alliance and the USFK ([87], p. 12). The deployment was perceived by the Chinese government as having strategic negative implications for the country. The strategic flexibility of the USFK validated Chinese concerns on the availability of the USFK against contingencies in China’s periphery ([20], pp. 114–117). This was a turning point that invited China’s reassessment of the mobility and availability of the USFK in reference to its Taiwan contingency. This is largely due to a public comment by the commander of the US 8th Army in South Korea who confirmed that the USFK was representing the national interest of not only the USA in the Korean peninsula but also the Asia-Pacific and the world ([10], p. 21, [77], p. 21).

Secondly, the USA’s emphasis on “double deterrence” in its war against terror campaign since 9/11 attack eventually transpired into schematic efforts to increase its “forward deployment” capacity and has worked as strategic pressure against China.<sup>21</sup> The idea of “double deterrence” was designed with the strategic aim of facilitating USFK’s deterrence capacity and capability against North Korea’s possible proliferation attempts which have strategic negative implications for China ([79], p. 3, [86]). In 2006, North Korea’s first nuclear test was indicative

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<sup>21</sup> A plan to transfer the alliance into a regional and even a global partnership was announced in the Strategic Alliance 2015 agreement, which is premised on the relocation of the USFK and enhancement of ROK’s defense capabilities [43].

of its possible and improved proliferating capacity of WMD. The USA was therefore compelled to seek measures acceptable by its allies, measures which were later delineated in the aforementioned strategic flexible concept and the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI).

Lastly, the meaning of “pre-emptive strike strategy” emphasizes the change in the defense role of the USFK—justifying the ensuing changes in the alliance structure and relocation of USFK military bases. Relocation of the USFK to the south of the Han River enabled US forces to have improved mobility and maneuverability. North Korea’s incessant nuclear development efforts called for USFK’s greater “surgical strike” capability against North Korea’s nuclear facilities and greater protection of the USFK by nullifying its once assumed role as “trip wire” [33]. Due to increasing demand for a hardline stance against North Korea within the USA, the theory of “balance of fear” provided the justification and legitimacy for the USA to enhance its “surgical strike” capability against the North ([15], p. 3). This surgical strike capability has become a legitimate strategic military response to the North by the USFK ([35], pp. 53–54, [9]). The fear and concern of the Chinese government toward this strategy was further strengthened when the strike capability was successful in real war situations in both Iraq and the Afghanistan war.

### **ROK-US Alliance’s Potential Challenges to China in the Post-unification Era**

As early as in 1992, America in the post-Cold War era had made public its commitment to the ROK-US alliance even after the unification of Korea. According to Pentagon’s 1992 Defense Planning Guidance document, it was emphasized that the USA “should seek to maintain an alliance relationship with a unified democratic Korea” due to potential uncertainties in the regional security environment and the need to defend Japan.<sup>22</sup> US commitment to the alliance even after peninsular unification was reiterated by then Secretary of Defense William Cohen: “US troops levels in both Japan and Korea would remain unchanged even if the Korean peninsula were peacefully reunified.”<sup>23</sup>

A joint study by think tanks from respective countries reaffirmed the need to sustain the alliance but in an adjusted form.<sup>24</sup> America’s persistent efforts to justify the sustainability of ROK-US alliance after unification are also driven by the fact that the end of the USFK would mean the end of USFJ. Once the linchpin in the ROK-US alliance is pulled, it would literally mean the collapse of the “hub-and-spoke” system of US alliance in East Asia. Hence, the USA had on many different occasions tried to convince the world through various channels about the rationality of sustaining the ROK-US alliance after unification.<sup>25</sup>

USA’s desire to sustain the alliance with Korea after unification is often perceived by Beijing as having one purpose: to deter China. Chinese strategic assessment was endorsed

<sup>22</sup> Cited in “U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop A One-Superpower World,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1992. Recited from ([66], p. 4).

<sup>23</sup> Cited in *South China Morning Post*, April 8, 1997. Recited from ([66], p. 4).

<sup>24</sup> The joint study was conducted by the Rand in the United States and Korea Institute of Defense Analysis of Korea ([52], p. 5).

<sup>25</sup> Other factors that accounted for America’s justification include those perceived by the USA as vital to its regional strategic interests. They involve US role in guaranteeing regional stability during the tenuous period of transition, free and open sea-lanes, and the defense of Taiwan ([44], pp. 124–29).

by the 2006 QDR where the USA had perceived China as “the greatest potential to compete militarily with the US and the country with field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional US military advantages ([17], p. 29).” As the report revealed for the first time US plan for the relocation of ROK-US alliance, the purpose of the adjustment was reported to have arisen out of the recognition that the USA would have to rebalance its alliance with the rise of China and its ally’s increasing reliance on China ([75], p. 102).

These developments were seen as factors of concerns for US national interest in Northeast Asia. GPR presented some countering strategic measures such as enhancing strategic flexibility and mobility of overseas US forces and expanding the global alliance network ([67], [50], pp. 83–96). The change in nature and characteristic of the US alliance was a transition from threat-oriented to capability-oriented and from a deterrence force to a regional peacekeeper; for China, these changes demanded in-depth reviews of the function and purpose of such enhancement works and the future objective of the activity, range, and scope of the alliance military [41].

The result of such reviews has made the Chinese government express its concern toward the USA and its alliance.<sup>26</sup> According to the USA, weapons and weapon systems that will be deployed in the future are of high accuracy and high degree of precision to provide extended deterrence from the nuclear threat ([14], pp. 40–42).

The Chinese government is concerned that the level of accuracy and precision of the US weapon systems will have severe impact on the national security of North Korea and similar impact will be felt in China ([76], p. 194). This concern is rooted in the fact that these weapons are of an advanced all-weather weapon systems (AWWS) which will have the capacity to defend as well as attack, characteristics that China would have to account for in its military strategy. Thus, to allay Chinese fears, the USA has deployed the less offensive missile defense (MD) system ([1], pp. 160–181). However, the USA had recently employed more offensive and effective weapon systems and weapons (e.g., aircraft carriers) for the joint military exercises with its respective allies, ROK and Japan. From 2010, the USA has called for trilateral military exercises incorporating both allies and the scale of their exercises has continued to expand.<sup>27</sup> The ever-expanding scale of such exercises and the relocation of the USFK presented a new dimension to the challenges faced by China’s security environment.

As of now, the purpose of the US strategy is to maintain the defense line at the Korean peninsula until augmentation is made from Japan and Hawaii. From the Chinese perspective, the relocation of the USFK not only contributed to its preemptive strike capability on the North, but led to a strong and ready position for quick responses with strategic implications for Japan’s greater military role.<sup>28</sup> It is also being perceived as an attempt to achieve the strategic objective of increasing the legitimacy

<sup>26</sup> Chinese reaction is well documented in ([51], pp. 100–104).

<sup>27</sup> The scale of the exercise already began to expand in 2002 even before the breakout of the second North Korean nuclear crisis in March 2002 for instance, with the participation of a US aircraft carrier and about 500,000 South Korean troops. It was then by far the largest exercise since the end of the Korean War in 1953 ([7], p. 23). The scale would only increase with such bombers as B-2 and B-52, and F-22 jet fighters flying more than 4000 times for target practice in addition to the participation of the 7th Fleet and nuclear submarines. It would later include US aircraft carrier in 2004 (Kitty Hawk) and 2010 (George Washington) ([14], pp. 40–42). For China’s assessment of the US-ROK-Japan joint military exercises ([5], pp. 62–63).

<sup>28</sup> Many Chinese analysts perceive Japan as taking advantage of the nuclear situation in North Korea to not only strengthen its alliance with the US, but also advance its military readiness and advancement ([6], [82], pp. 60–61).

for deploying missile defense system in the peninsula. The Chinese government has continuously expressed its concern that deploying AWWS in the Korean peninsula would only raise the prospect of military confrontation and the possibility of a crisis. They have also claimed that such confrontation would not only lead to an influx of refugees from North Korea but also remove the buffer zone for Chinese military strategy, thus endangering its national security ([9], p. 62, [11], p. 42).

Second, the strengthening of the USFK and the ROK-US with AWWS will negatively impact North Korean security. After announcing USFK's relocation in the peninsula, the US government announced a series of measures to enhance operational capability. PSI was announced in 2003 as part of this measure and South Korea in 2009 decided to join this preventive scheme against North Korea's nuclear ambition. Furthermore, North Korea's continuous military provocations—the Sinking of *Cheonan* corvette and the Shelling of Yeonpyeong island, nuclear weapons tests (2006, 2009, and 2013), and numerous deployment of “satellites” or long-range missiles with countless launches of short-and medium-range missiles—only justified the call for joint defense by the USA, Japan, and South Korea during a meeting held in Washington, DC on December 6, 2012 ([70], p. 44).

The Chinese government has also criticized the ROK-US alliance announcement of ‘OPLAN 5029’—a contingency plan that calls for the direct intervention of the alliance in the event of a collapse of North Korea—which heightened North Korea's anxiety and insecurity, thereby fueling North Korea's will to acquire nuclear weapons ([21], p. 29).

Third, the strategy to relocate US forces translates into geostrategic threats to China. As this relocation may effectively deter China's military build-up along the “first island chain,” Chinese experts claim that it will significantly undermine the maritime security of the Northeast Asian region and expose the vulnerability of Chinese coastal defense capability. China's geostrategic concern is further intensified by the prospective consequence of a possible arms race prompted by the US relocation strategy ([84], pp. 11–12). It also increases North Korea's security concerns, facilitating a shift in the strategic balance to further favor only South Korea.

From Beijing's perspective, expanded military exercise meant an increased participation of US aircraft carriers in the joint military exercises conducted by the ROK-US-Japan alliance in the vicinity of China's peripheral waters for maritime exercise purposes. This is a major cause for concern as China had historically developed a “fear toward the aircraft carrier.” During the Korean War in 1950, the US 7th Fleet was mobilized to the defense of the Taiwan Strait. In 1996, two aircraft carriers—Nimitz and Independence—were deployed to the Strait on two different occasions when China demonstrated its missile capability to Taiwan ([49], p. 9). These incidents continued even as the US aircraft carrier was deployed to take part in the 2004 and 2010 ROK-US joint military exercises. Thus, enhanced cooperation between the ROK-US with US aircraft carriers is perceived as a threat to Chinese national security ([11], p. 44).<sup>29</sup>

Fourth, the new military strategy formulated by the ROK-US alliance based on the relocation of US forces presented a direct security challenge and threat to China. This

<sup>29</sup> *Xinhuanet*, June 6, 2010, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2010-07/06/c\\_12305072.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2010-07/06/c_12305072.htm) (accessed June 7, 2010); *Yonhap News*, July 7, 2010; and Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Press Briefing, July 8, 2010, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/gxh/tyb/fyrbt/jzhsl/t714888.htm> (accessed July 11, 2010, and July 13, 2010), <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/gxh/tyb/fyrbt/jzhsl/t716403.htm> (accessed July 16, 2010).

implied direct linkage to issues such as the possibility of South Korean armed forces intervening in a Taiwan crisis, sudden changes in North Korea and deployment of US missile defense system in the Korean peninsula. According to China's assessment, South Korea has thus far shown great restraint not to be involved with the security issues of others; however, if a strong tie similar to US-Japan ties is to be established with the USA [64], South Korea might not be able to further uphold such restraint as witnessed in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan. The analysis done by the Chinese government claimed that the strategic focus of greater flexibility attached to overseas US forces is to provide geographical, technological advantage for these US forces. This advantage is expected to have similar effects on the USFK and USFJ, along with improved US capability of rapid deployment of bombers and nuclear submarines.<sup>30</sup>

Fifth, the realignment of the USFK and ROK-US alliance will become an obstacle to establishing a multilateral security cooperation framework. According to Chinese experts, the continuation of the alliance will only perpetuate the division of the peninsula. The unification can only be achieved if and when the USA withdraws its troops from the Korean peninsula and engages in dialogue with North Korea. Enhancing the ROK-US alliance will only backfire, triggering an arms race and provoking militarization ([26], p. 19).

If this does not work, Chinese experts argue that the only strategic option available to China is to establish a multilateral security cooperation arrangement that could undermine the US alliance system. This multilateral cooperation will function as an external constraint on the deployment of US forces and an external factor to the enhancement of Chinese national security ([11], p. 45). Simply put, China wishes to improve China-US relationship and strengthen diplomatic ties with Korea while checking the ROK-US alliance. From the Chinese perspective, for instance, the Six-Party Talk is one of the effective means to achieve this end. However, the Chinese government has shown how paradoxical it can get with its stance on multilateral security cooperation and aspiration to modernize its military so as to acquire real war capability and defense capability to respond to US forces in the region [57, 62, 72].

Finally, the issue of Taiwan. It will be facilitated by the geographical advantage that the USFK is endowed with compared to those US bases in Japan and Guam. While the unfueled combat radius of current and next-generation jet fighters (e.g., F-22 and the Joint Strike Fighters) is a distance of 500 nautical miles (nm), the distance from Taiwan for US Air Forces bases in Korea is 800 nm, Misawa Air Base in Japan 1400 nm, and Guam 1500 nm, respectively ([25], p. 127). Under the current circumstances, the potential possibility of an intervention from Korea by US air forces to a Taiwanese crisis is high.

According to the Chinese military, as long as the threat by North Korea exists, the US forces would be held "hostage" to Korean national security and neither Korea nor the USA will wish to take active role in intervening in a Taiwanese crisis ([54], p. 23). Thus, to the Chinese, USFK's involvement in Taiwan contingency will heavily hinge

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<sup>30</sup> China's such concerns were arisen by the remark by then US Pacific Commander William J. Fallon on March 7, 2006, when he rationalized US-ROK alliance in the context of joint military exercises among the USA, Japan, and ROK as to defend against non-traditional security threats, China's military modernization, and changes in security environment as a result of improved inter-Korean relations ([39], p. 54).

upon the North Korea's threat status and how effectively North Korea can hold the USFK hostage.

## Conclusion: Unification and ROK-US Alliance

China has persistently claimed that Korean unification should be independent and autonomous, and preclude external intervention or involvement such as the ROK-US alliance in the unification process. This implies that China will render its full support to Korean unification only when and if the unification is decided and carried out by the Korean people. China has refused to render support if the unification occurs by military means (i.e., war) or violent/coercive measures (i.e., implosion/collapse of North Korea) ([83], pp. 30–32).

The Chinese principles prescribe the total exclusion or the absolute absence of the ROK-US alliance involvement. China's prescription may be directly tied to a possible side-effect of the alliance's involvement. As argued by the Chinese, this might perpetuate the Cold War's security structure in the region with strategic implications for the security situation in the Taiwan Strait, granted that Korean unification precedes China.

Given Chinese security concerns, Beijing's support for the Korean unification is contingent on the dissolution of the alliance and the complete withdrawal of the USFK. It will be a challenging precondition for a unified Korea to accept as long as the current power structure persists even after the unification. It is foreseeable that, in lieu of an alternative security arrangement, only a unified Korea can forestall the total abandonment of the ROK-US alliance "at least until trust and cooperation pervade in regional interstate relationships" ([45], p. 23).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Others who have questioned if USFK and the alliance should sustain after the unification of Korea include [2, 29, 46, 47, 59].

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