

The Media and the U.S.-ROK Alliance: The South Korean Case¹

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In November 2002, five months after U.S. military vehicles accidentally killed two Korean school girls in a Seoul suburb, Ambassador Thomas Hubbard issued an official apology on behalf of President Bush: "Just this morning, the president sent me a message asking me to convey his apologies to the families of the girls, to the government of the Republic of Korea and to the people of Korea." In the past, such accidents would have gone largely unnoticed but this time the U.S. was compelled to issue a presidential apology. A half dozen years later, pressured by massive public protests against importation of US beef, the four-month old Lee government, despite a former agreement with President Bush, demanded the prohibition of U.S. beef more than 30 months old to be exported to Korea. In both instances, the Bush administration was concerned with the potential adverse impact on the alliance as the Korean media were able to mobilize thousands of angry protesters, sparking an influx of anti-American sentiment across the country. Reluctantly, the U.S. accepted the Korean demands. These two cases clearly show that the U.S.-ROK alliance can no longer be deduced down to simple measures of power. Rather relational dynamics have shifted; enabling a former client to make demands on its patron and see such demands materialize.

Observers of Korean affairs note that the Korean media have contributed to the rise of the South Korean public's adversarial attitude toward the U.S. and its changing perceptions of the alliance with the United States as illustrated by the aforementioned cases.² In particular, the progressive media that gained substantial influence during the

administrations of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun have promoted ‘nationalist’ views challenging Korea’s dependence on the United States for their national security.

Although previous works have documented changes in Korean public “attitudes” or “sentiments” toward the U.S. and the alliance, there is a need to better understand the media’s role in shaping such attitude changes and influencing alliance politics.

Public opinion research has indicated an agenda-setting role within the news media for public discussion of key policy issues; exposure to news can significantly influence public opinion and its perceptions of other nations.³ Also, by shaping public opinion, the mass media can indirectly influence foreign policy making processes.⁴ The media can even provide an important medium in forging a nation’s identity, which would, as constructivists of international relations argue, provide “the foundation of state power and foreign policy.”⁵ Building on this media research, this paper examines how the South Korean media have covered the alliance issue and assesses how that has contributed to the increasingly contentious alliance politics in the South. It concludes with policy implications that can be useful to both Korean and American policy makers.

The Role of the Media in Alliance Politics

The mass media address issues and events in two principal ways. First, they offer basic *descriptive* or *factual* statements and stories. Descriptive statements and stories are those in which the reporter narrates key events or issues and summarizes related developments. In addition, the media offer *evaluative* or *analytical* statements, in which reporters interpret or judge developing events, government policies, foreign nations’ actions and motivations, and so on. Often, evaluative statements deal in norms and

values; they commentate on certain phenomena, suggesting how something should or should not be.

A story in the mass media may contain both descriptive and evaluative statements. For instance, if part of a story states that the U.S. and South Korea plan to renegotiate the terms of a specific trade agreement and that story goes on to speculate about certain implications that this new agreement might have for the general health and direction of the alliance, then this story has both descriptive and evaluative elements.

Through these forms of news coverage, the media play a number of important roles. Besides providing readers with factual or descriptive information on key events and issues, news coverage casts the spotlight of public attention on previously obscure or otherwise undisputed issues. Quite significantly, the media can frame the terms on which the public debates and evaluates specific policies. Through these priming and framing roles, the news media often set the agenda for public discussion and debate of key policy issues.⁶ Scholars have commented on how exposure to news can significantly influence public opinion on foreign policy issues as well as perceptions of other nations.⁷

In both reflecting and shaping public opinion, the mass media can influence foreign policy-making processes. Public opinion, long thought to be largely irrelevant to foreign policy making, has increasingly been accepted as a significant factor in policy decisions.⁸ A number of case studies have established the role of public opinion in particular policy areas, such as U.S. relations with China and arms control issues.⁹ In the Monroe study, foreign policy corresponded with the policy favored by the majority of Americans in more than 90 percent of the cases examined, and changes in collective public opinion were followed by congruent changes in policy approximately two-thirds

of the time.¹⁰ Both Cohen's and Powlick's studies showed that many foreign policy makers see major U.S. newspapers as surrogates for public opinion and often pay particular attention to editorials and opinion columns, which may offer useful ideas or reflect partisan reactions to policies from various segments of the political spectrum.¹¹

Most people in the United States and South Korea learn about issues of foreign affairs through the mass media, rather than by direct association or involvement. In the case of South Korea, it is entirely possible that the news media have contributed to the public's changing perceptions of the United States and the bilateral alliance. In the United States, as well, the news media likely have some influence on Americans' views of Korea, although probably to a lesser degree (for reasons that will be specified later). Given the media's influence in the realm of foreign affairs as well as domestic politics, the role it plays in shaping issues related to the U.S.-ROK alliance merits a careful examination.

Media Environments in South Korea and the United States

In understanding media's role in alliance politics, it is crucial to note the different media environments in the United States and South Korea. In the nineteenth-century United States, most newspapers had an informal party affiliation and openly advocated for their parties' candidates.¹² The U.S. media environment has evolved significantly since that time, however, and objectivity, nonpartisanship, and high standards of journalistic ethics are now the aims of mainstream media organizations.

In contrast, the media environment in South Korea today is not much different from that of the nineteenth-century United States. The South Korean news media are sharply divided on key policy issues—both domestic and foreign—in accordance with

their ideological leanings. As many observers of Korean affairs have noted, a particular Korean media outlet often reflects only one side of a given issue, espousing almost entirely conservative or progressive views, depending on its leadership, orientation, and/or audience.¹³ This sharp division includes views of the North Korea issue and South Korea's relationship with the United States. Most progressive newspapers characterize themselves as nationalist and seek to expedite the inter-Korean reconciliation process while questioning the rationale for the presence of U.S. troops on the Korean peninsula. On the other side, conservative newspapers generally insist that their government should demand greater reciprocity from North Korea while stressing the strategic importance of the U.S.-ROK alliance in resolving the North Korea issue. Korean newspapers' deep divide and heated debates on key policy issues make for an interesting analytical window to examine the Korean press and better understand South Koreans' changing views of the alliance.

The U.S. and South Korean news media also differ in terms of the capacity to reach their respective national publics. Compared with their Korean counterparts, U.S. newspapers generally have much smaller circulations. For instance, the *New York Times*, has a weekday circulation of only about 1 million. Moreover, in the United States, there is no national newspaper in any strict sense.¹⁴ In contrast, many major news media in South Korea are larger in circulation and more national in scope. *Chosun Ilbo* has a daily circulation of more than 2 million, thus reaching a significant portion of the ROK's approximately 47 million people. Even though *Hankyoreh* cannot claim the same volume of readers, it has strongly influenced policy making during the progressive governments and is now a leading critical voice of the Lee administration's key policies.

As the US-ROK alliance is asymmetrical in terms of power and resources, there is also an asymmetry of attention between the two nations. This lopsided amount of attention is apparent in the respective ways each country covers their nations' relationship. For instance, attention to Korea (i.e., the U.S.-ROK relationship) in the United States media is not a major component of regular coverage. As an earlier study notes,¹⁵ major U.S. newspapers accord the ROK about one-quarter the coverage of Japan; the frequency of articles about South Korea is more comparable to that of Italy, Argentina, or Indonesia and most coverage of Korea comes from Tokyo-based bureaus or news stringers in Seoul.¹⁶ However, coverage of the United States exceeds South Korean media coverage of foreign countries, garnering more attention than even North Korea or China. South Korean newspapers maintain news staff in Washington, DC (and in some cases, also in New York and/or Los Angeles), and these correspondents' work expands beyond solely news articles; many also write opinion-editorials on the United States and its relationship with Korea.

Similarly, the nature of U.S. and Korean media coverage of their alliance counterpart is quite different. Among U.S. media, coverage of Korean affairs is largely composed of descriptive articles that feature some news analysis; there is not a sizeable number of editorials or columns on Korean affairs. Korean news about the United States features more evaluative content, with a much larger number of editorials and columns. In short, the United States' place in the Korean media is far more prominent than Korea's place in the U.S. media.¹⁷

These differences in the U.S. and Korean news media have crucial implications for understanding alliance politics in the two countries: the United States is featured

much more prominently in the Korean media than Korea is in the U.S. press; the United States is a “significant other” for Koreans affecting their national identity, while Korea is not as important to Americans; the Korean news media are often evaluative in their coverage of U.S.-related issues, while the U.S. media’s coverage of Korean affairs is largely descriptive; and the Korean press is highly partisan and far better at reaching the national public. In light of these factors, it is logical to expect more heated debates on U.S.-ROK relations in Korean media than in U.S. media.

South Korean Media Coverage of the U.S. and Alliance

In this section I look at Korean media coverage of U.S.-related topics to spotlight the dynamics of inter-alliance politics based on my earlier study. I specifically consider editorials and opinion columns from Korea’s two major newspapers, *Chosun Ilbo* () and *Hankyoreh* () from July 1992 to July 2003.¹⁸ In accordance with the contemporary media environment in South Korea, these two newspapers are taken as representations of prevailing conservative and progressive views¹⁹

1) The Press View: Security over Economy

It can generally be inferred that Korean media’s interest in the United States extends beyond the bilateral relationship. For instance, when data from *Chosun* and *Hankyoreh* are averaged, as shown in Table 1, almost half (44.7%) of all editorials and columns focused on issues pertaining to the U.S. itself. The U.S.-ROK relationship received approximately one-third of all U.S.-related coverage (32.2%). Still, compared with U.S. media coverage of ROK-related matters, the Korean media devoted far more coverage to the relationship.²⁰ It is interesting to point out that the progressive newspaper accorded

nearly equal attention to the United States and U.S.-South Korea relations over the course of this study (38.7% vs. 37.5%). These findings suggest two things. First, the bilateral relationship is seen as a more critical issue to Koreans than to Americans. And second, Korean progressives have been more active in bringing the bilateral relationship to the forefront of major policy issues in accordance with their ideology.

Table 1: Article Count by Focus Category

Focus	Chosun	Hankyoreh	Total
U.S.	467 49.8%	304 38.63%	771 44.7%
U.S.-ROK	263 28.1%	295 37.5%	558 32.3%
U.S.-DPRK	171 18.3%	169 21.5%	340 19.7%
Other	36 3.8%	19 2.4%	55 3.2%
Total	937 100%	787 100%	1,724 100%

Source: Shin, *One Alliance, Two Lenses*, pp. 85.

Table 2 shows that *Hankyoreh* and *Chosun* both accorded significant percentages of their coverage to security issues, especially in their coverage of the U.S.-ROK relationship. (Security aspects of the bilateral relationship are tantamount to the alliance.) Alliance issues composed nearly half (48.62%) of the conservative daily's coverage of the bilateral relationship over the study period, and for *Hankyoreh*, alliance issues composed more than two-thirds (68.27%) of U.S.-ROK relations coverage. My previous study indicated that economic and trade issues were much more prominently featured in U.S. newspapers' coverage of the ROK. This is an interesting disparity in perception,

given that for the duration of the study period, the United States was the ROK’s largest trading partner. Thereby it is feasible to conclude that security issues remain the defining characteristic of the U.S.-ROK relationship in the minds of the Korean people.

Table 2: Most Prevalent Issues by Focus Category

		Chosun (%)	Hankyoreh (%)	Total (%)
U.S.				
	Security	28.15	47.38	35.74
	U.S. Politics	34.12	17.97	27.74
	Economy/Trade	18.34	18.95	18.58
U.S.-ROK				
	Security	48.62	68.27	59.09
	Economy/trade	18.43	13.45	15.78
	Foreign Affairs	18.82	8.97	13.58

Source: Shin, *One Alliance, Two Lenses*, pp. 85.

These statistics provide useful insight into how the Korean media—and by extension, the Korean people—perceive the role of the alliance within the larger realm of U.S.-ROK relations. The alliance seems to dominate the media’s conception of the bilateral relationship. In addition, it is noteworthy that the progressive newspaper devoted a higher percentage of its coverage to security issues, within both U.S.-ROK and U.S. coverage, than the conservative newspaper did. This finding indicates that in leading the challenge to the conventional wisdom about the alliance, progressive forces, including *Hankyoreh*, had an agenda-setting effect. They provoked a debate that increased both progressive and conservative newspapers’ coverage of alliance issues, as ideologically opposed media outlets sought to refute each other and advance their own positions.

In terms of specific issue coverage in *Chosun* and *Hankyoreh* editorials and columns (see Table 3), it is apparent that the presence of U.S. troops in South Korea was the leading topic, again demonstrating that in terms of Korean interest and perception, the military alliance is the core of the U.S.-ROK relationship. (The topic of U.S.-ROK trade was a distant second at 13.95%). Table 3 reveals that *Hankyoreh* devoted half of its coverage of the bi-lateral relationship to the subject of troops, while *Chosun* devoted less than one-quarter of its coverage to this subject—a noteworthy disparity. Korean progressives led the questioning of the U.S. military presence on ROK soil by focusing on and consistently expressing outrage over negative aspects such as crimes committed by American GIs.

Table 3: Most Prevalent Subject Matters by Focus Category

Subject	Chosun (%)	Hankyoreh (%)	Total (%)
U.S.			
U.S. Domestic Politics	22.29	7.84	16.60
U.S. Economy/Industry	15.92	14.71	15.44
U.S. Security	9.98	18.95	13.51
U.S. Election	11.46	9.48	10.68
Security of Iraq	4.25	10.13	6.56
U.S.-ROK			
U.S. Troops in South Korea	23.95	50.34	37.92
U.S.-South Korea Trade	15.97	12.16	13.95
Other Diplomacy	10.65	4.73	7.51
DPRK WMD	11.03	3.72	7.16
Anti-Americanism in ROK	8.37	4.05	6.08

Source: Shin, *One Alliance, Two Lenses*, pp. 87.

Together, these findings clearly show that the U.S.-ROK relationship yields significant coverage in the Korean media (more so than in the U.S. media). Moreover,

security—and to a large extent, the U.S. troop presence—is what defines the bilateral relationship, despite the importance of economic ties.

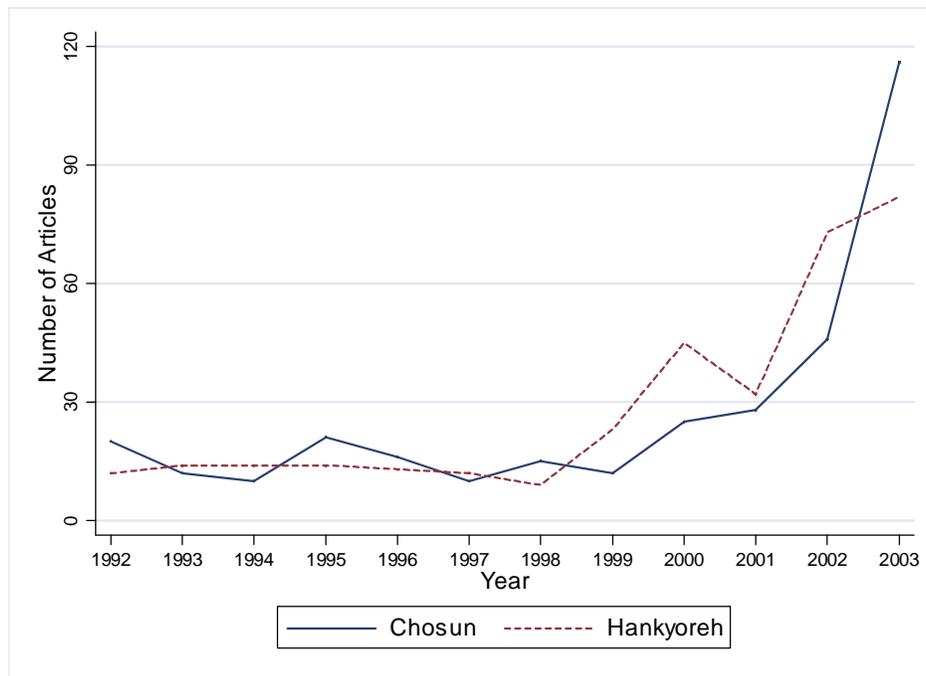
2) Media's Role in Debates over Alliance

The extensive press coverage shown above suggests that the media has been an important place for discussion and debate on alliance issues among Koreans. In particular, in an attempt to challenge the conventional view and to promote a new perspective on U.S.-ROK relations, the progressive media framed the alliance debate, setting the terms to which the conservative side had to respond—namely, South Korea's interests to wholeheartedly pursue a new relationship with North Korea while making changes to its unequal alliance with the United States. *Hankyoreh*, for instance, accused conservative forces of being “trapped in the Cold War-era concept,” arguing that conservative notions of South Korea's security interests vis-à-vis the North and the United States are outdated and that when it comes to brethren in the North, *Chosun* can be “cold-hearted.”²¹

Figure 1 illustrates intensified debate over the alliance between progressive and conservative forces in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Prior to 1999, *Hankyoreh*'s interest in the bilateral relationship appeared rather flat, and the progressive newspaper accorded roughly a similar level of coverage as its conservative counterpart. Yet after 1999, attention levels substantially increased and inter-newspaper disparities became apparent, indicating a very different environment—one in which the U.S.-ROK relationship was a topic of heated debate. It appears that *Hankyoreh* led this debate, challenging conventional wisdom on the relationship through a significant increase in critical editorials and columns. *Chosun* followed suit, increasing the number of editorials

and columns on the relationship, refuting progressive criticism, defending its positions, and criticizing the attitudes and actions of the progressive administrations that had come to power.

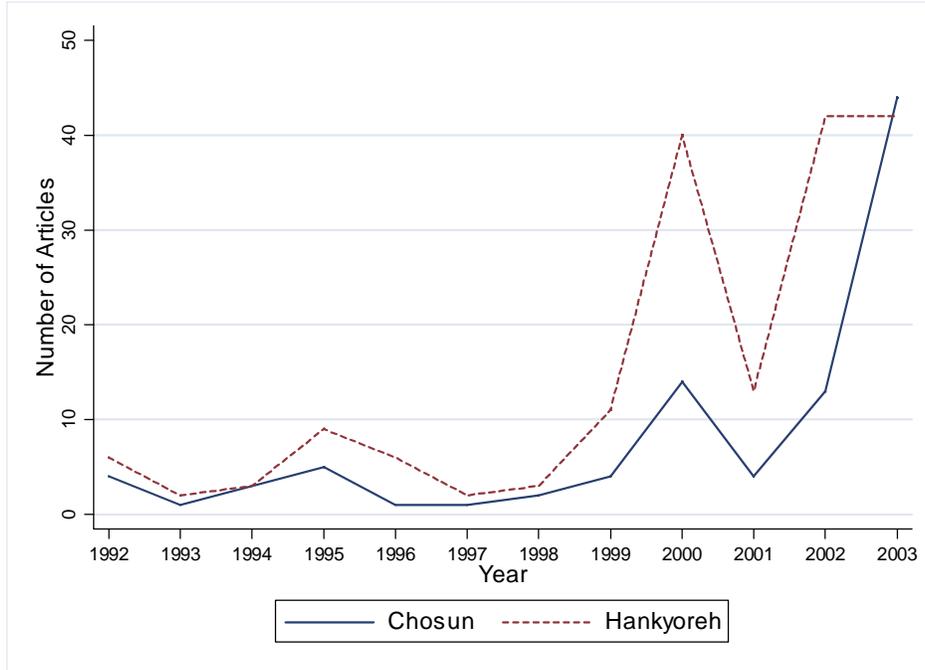
Figure 1: Media Attention to U.S.-ROK Relations



Source: Shin, *One Alliance, Two Lenses*, pp. 89.

Figure 2 charts the number of editorials and columns each newspaper published on U.S. troops in the ROK from 1994 to 2003. As shown below, *Hankyoreh* exhibited a very negative tone toward this subject and published much more than its conservative counterpart. While both newspapers published less than 10 editorials and/or columns per year on the presence of U.S. troops in the ROK before 1999, coverage levels increased fourfold by 2003. Once again, *Hankyoreh* initiated the dramatic increase in coverage, and *Chosun* mirrored the increase, although to a lesser degree.

Figure 2: Media Attention to U.S. Troops in ROK



Source: Shin, *One Alliance, Two Lenses*, pp. 92.

The extraordinary increase in *Hankyoreh*'s coverage from 1999 to 2000 likely reflected an environment in which progress in inter-Korean relations, including the landmark inter-Korean summit, spurred a broader reexamination of the alliance, especially in the wake of unfortunate incidents involving U.S. soldiers. In these years, nationwide outrage was incited by the Nogun-ri controversy, the Maehyang-ri bombing range accident, the discharging of formaldehyde into the Han River, and the negotiations of the Status of Forces Agreement—events that the progressive media focused on heavily (and much less so by the conservative mainstream). According to a senior U.S. diplomat in Seoul at that time, the standard story line in the media was that U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) was on a rampage, showing no respect for the lives of Koreans.²² Additionally, former Foreign Minister Han Sung Joo asserted that, “[The] perception of a thaw between

North and South Korea in the wake of the June summit . . . provided a convenient platform for those who have always opposed the U.S. troop presence to promote their cause among the broader spectrum of the South Korean public.”²³ An ardent progressive crusade on this issue and a new spirit of inter-Korean cooperation persuaded additional elements of the political spectrum that it was no longer necessary to endure the inconveniences associated with U.S. troops stationed on the peninsula. This mindset evolved despite President Kim Dae Jung’s strong argument that the alliance remained relevant in the Sunshine era, if only for regional security.

Although coverage of the troop issue dropped in 2001, most likely due to the effects of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, the tragic 2002 schoolgirl incident led to reinstatement of higher levels of coverage of U.S. troops in Korea. This was especially true of *Hankyoreh*, whose volume of editorials and columns remained nearly four times greater than that of *Chosun*. By 2003, a dramatic increase in the number of articles that *Chosun* published illustrated that the debate had reached a new level of aggravation, as both countries initiated Future of the Alliance consultations on the relocation of Yongsan Garrison along with a variety of other troop presence issues.

3) Growing Disparities and Alliance Politics

The Korean media have been accused of reporting only one side, depending on the leadership, orientation, or audience of the particular media outlet in question and this is expected to be seen in the coverage of the U.S.-ROK alliance.²⁴ What are these disparities specifically and have such increased over time? In no uncertain terms, *Hankyoreh* exhibited more negative tones than *Chosun*—toward the United States, U.S.-

ROK relations, and every U.S.-related issue. Table 4 introduces aggregate data on both papers' average news tones toward the United States and U.S.-ROK relations, as well as relevant issues and subjects. The greatest disparity in tone between the two newspapers is observed for the subject of U.S. forces in the ROK (−1.34 for *Hankyoreh* versus −0.23 for *Chosun*). As shown in Table 3, the progressive newspaper devoted the highest proportion of its U.S.-ROK coverage to this subject, and this coverage was clearly quite negative. These sizeable disparities in views confirm not only that Korean progressives are very critical of the U.S.-ROK alliance but also that the alliance, including the U.S. troop presence in Korea, has become a point of significant contention between progressives and conservatives.

Table 4: Average News Tone by Focus, issue and Subject

	Chosun Average Tone	Hankyoreh Average Tone	All Average Tone
FOCUS			
U.S.	-0.23	-0.90	-0.57
U.S.-ROK	-0.42	-1.11	-0.77
ISSUE			
Security	-0.52	-0.85	-0.69
Economics/Trade	-0.37	-0.90	-0.64
U.S. Politics	-0.01	-0.51	-0.26
SUBJECT			
DPRK WMD	-0.61	-0.40	-0.51
U.S. Troops in ROK	-0.23	-1.34	-0.79

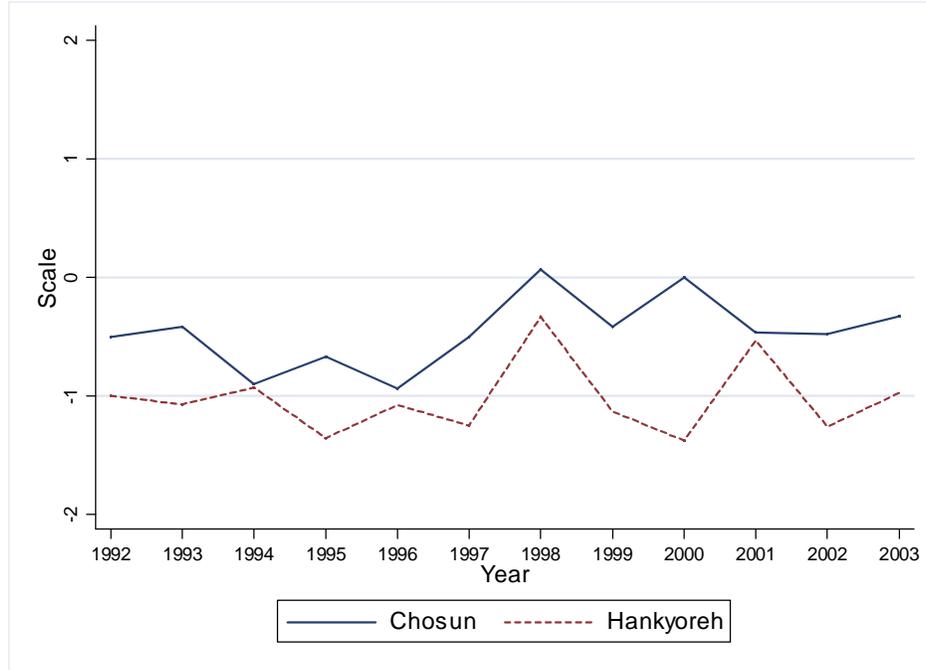
Source: Shin, *One Alliance, Two Lenses*, pp. 98.

Overall, the Korean media's tone toward the bilateral relationship (−0.77) was much more negative than the U.S. media's coverage of the relationship (−0.18). This was also the case in their respective coverage of economic and trade issues (−0.64 in the Korean media versus −0.38 in the U.S. media). Not surprisingly, Korean conservative views of the U.S.-ROK relationship are closer to U.S. views, while Korean progressive

views appear quite distinct. These perception gaps—within Korea and between the United States and the ROK—have important policy implications.

Conservative and progressive media have consistently displayed contrasting views of key events regarding the U.S.-ROK alliance. This is well illustrated by the changes between 1999 and 2000 and between 2001 and 2002 from Figure 3. For instance, the June 2000 inter-Korean summit may have reinforced conservatives' beliefs that U.S.-ROK relations allow the ROK to deal with the DPRK from a position of strength and that the alliance remains necessary and relevant. Yet the summit may also have simultaneously reinforced progressives' views that in the post-cold war era new rapprochement was possible in inter-Korean relations and the ROK's subordinate relationship to the United States merely hindered such possibilities. Indeed, in the historic summit's immediate aftermath, *Hankyoreh* argued that the leaders' meeting meant that the "U.S. military presence and mutual arms reduction [could now] become agenda items," while a *Chosun* editorial sought to reassert the importance of the alliance, maintaining that "Seoul should not dare think about having U.S. troops withdraw from Korea."²⁵

Figure 3: Average News Tone on U.S.-ROK Relations



Source: Shin, *One Alliance, Two Lenses*, pp. 95.

Similarly, it is important to note the change (or lack of change) in tone from 2001 to 2002 in the two newspapers as indicated in Figure 3. The year 2002 included two pivotal moments: the death of the two schoolgirls, which ignited severe demonstrations as well as propelled demands for revision of the U.S.-ROK Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), and the initiation of the current nuclear standoff. As expected, the progressive newspaper turned much more negative in its tone toward U.S.-ROK relations, while the conservative newspaper showed no discernible change in tone. As progressives became more critical of the U.S.-ROK relationship, conservatives became more concerned with the deteriorating relationship and reacted by stressing the importance of the alliance.

The more positive *Chosun* reflected conservatives' fear of "strategic abandonment" by the United States due to their displeasure with arguments advanced by progressive critics.²⁶ Driven by such concern over the U.S. perception of Korean (progressive) ingratitude and hostility, *Chosun* increased its number of editorials and columns that stressed the importance of the relationship and were significantly more positive than those appearing in *Hankyoreh*. Korean conservatives might not have been pleased with U.S. policy toward the North or, for that matter, with U.S. foreign policy on the world stage. (The Pew survey shows this was the case for a number of U.S. allies at this time.) Regardless, that did not preclude them from arguing the merits of the alliance.

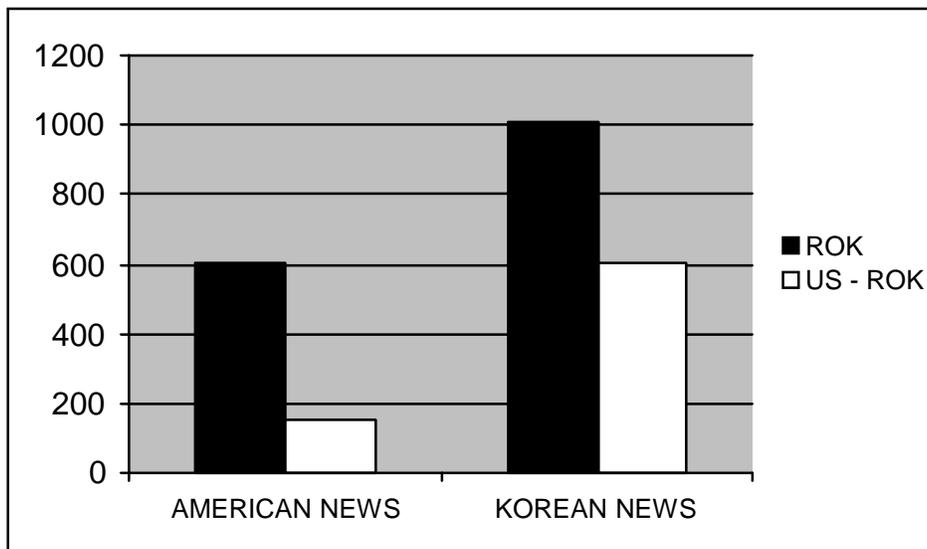
Media, Asymmetry of Attention, and the Alliance

While the United States plays an important role in ROK security and American troops stationed on the peninsula is a feature of daily life for many Koreans, the ROK does not guarantee U.S. security and the alliance rarely touches the lives of average Americans. Koreans have not influenced U.S. politics in the same way Americans are perceived to have influenced Korean politics, and Americans certainly do not believe that Koreans have perpetrated great injustices on their fellow citizens. To South Korea the U.S. is not simply another state in the international system but has acted as a 'significant other,' perhaps the most important, playing a central role in shaping South Korea's national interests since 1945.²⁷ On the other hand, for the U.S., South Korea initially was a strategic security bulwark that has since evolved into an economic partner. Korea is one of many US allies. These differing national perceptions of both the practical and the political functions of the alliance deeply rooted in history and culture produce different

levels of attention to the alliance. It is in this context that there exists a significant asymmetry in media attention to the bilateral relationship. However, in this case it exists in South Korea's favor.

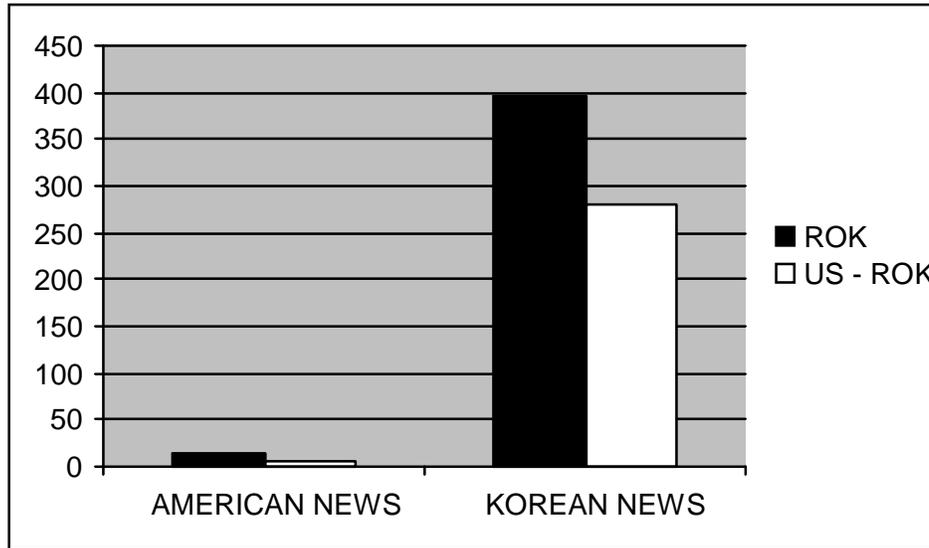
Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the extent of Korean news attention to the United States and that of U.S. news attention to the ROK, respectively, over the course of the study period. The disparity in coverage is stark, especially regarding the U.S.-ROK relationship. On average, the Korean newspapers published about 1.6 times as many articles on the United States (1,012) as the U.S. newspapers published on the ROK (630). However, the Korean newspapers published 4 times as many articles about U.S.-ROK relations (610) as the U.S. newspapers did (151) over the study years. Even more dramatically, on average, the Korean newspapers published 56 times the number of editorials and columns on U.S.-ROK relations as the U.S. newspapers did.

Figure 4: ROK and U.S.-ROK Relations Reported in News Articles



Source: Shin, *One Alliance, Two Lenses*, pp. 109.

Figure 5 ROK and U.S.-ROK Relations Reported in Editorials



Source: Shin, *One Alliance, Two Lenses*, pp. 109.

The significance of disproportionate attention to the alliance was clearly displayed in instances such as the 2002 schoolgirl deaths and the 2008 beef protests wherein an impassioned Korean media played a key role in compelling some type of U.S. concession. Right after the schoolgirl deaths, the South Korean media paid only minimal attention to the accident as the major news stories were Korean soccer team's stellar performance at the 2002 World Cup and an accidental clash with the North Korean Navy. However, in the weeks following the situation turned into a media frenzy. The progressive online newspaper *OhMyNews* mounted the charge that mobilized tens of thousands when they published a wide array of stories on the topic, demanding an official apology for the deaths and subsequent "fraudulent verdicts."²⁸ Progressive reports instituted an angry call for mobilization to demand a legitimate American repentance: "If we put our people's strength together, the day will come when the arrogant and ignorant Bush will apologize, kneeling down in front of our people."²⁹ South Korean coverage of the issue trumped the

attention in U.S. press who concentrated on the military accident and the resulting demonstrations as part of the larger increasing anti-American sentiment on the peninsula.³⁰

During the brunt of protests, the US foreign policy agenda was wholly dedicated to its War on Terror and surge in Iraq. American policy makers had little time to give the incident in Korea the attention demanded on part of Koreans. However, as protests grew and the situation became increasingly unstable, President Bush issued an unprecedented formal apology. The tragic event provoked a Korean demand for a change in the SOFA, the legal terms for the U.S. troops in Korea. Besides offering an apology (albeit controversial in nature), the U.S. agreed to start discussing Future of the Alliance consultations on the relocation of Yongsan Garrison along with a variety of other troop presence issues.

In the summer of 2008, in a manner reminiscent of the public reaction to the schoolgirl tragedy, the progressive media led another round of mass mobilization over the issue of U.S. beef imports. The protests were primarily against the newly established Lee Myung Bak government but had implications for the U.S.-ROK alliance, eventually propelling a U.S. concession. When he decided to open the market to US beef imports following his early summit in Washington with President Bush, progressives charged that Lee was eagerly trying to “please the United States” at whatever cost to Korea.³¹ In the coming months, stories of the issue were rampant in the Korean media; the Korean television station, MBC, brought the issue to the forefront of public awareness. While several of the claims were disputable, it promoted a broad theme that Korean leaders had been overly beholden to American demands and had been compelled to sacrifice a degree

of national sovereignty and the health of Korean citizens. While the station would later publicly admit to conveying certain misinformation in the program, sufficient damage had been done to provoke massive public protests shortly following the episode's airdate.

As the situation escalated, President Lee sent a Korean negotiation team to Washington, calling on the US to prohibit beef more than 30 months old to be exported to Korea³² The U.S. government was not only concerned with the volatility of the protests but President Lee's struggle to cope politically was also disconcerting. Subsequently, an American concession was seemingly the most plausible remedy to the situation.

Similar to the rampant protests six years earlier, this episode dominated in the Korean press but garnered relatively limited media attention in the United States.³³ The issue was propagated primarily through both progressive and conservative's public debate of the issue, mobilizing thousands against the Lee government. It was a stark reminder of the latent power within Korean civil society and the Lee government was compelled to placate protests by garnering a U.S. concession on the issue.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

In the post-September 11 era, US foreign policy has not been met with much acceptance. As a Pew report summarizes, "the war [in Iraq] has widened the rift between Americans and Western Europeans, further inflamed the Muslim world, softened support for the war on terrorism, and significantly weakened global public support for the pillars of the post-World War II era, the U.N. and the North Atlantic alliance."³⁴ The prevalence of unfavorable view towards the U.S. in Arab states was not too surprising given their history of tense relations with the United States, but the rise of anti-American sentiment

in avowed allies like South Korea was quite disturbing. Such discord has disrupted sound coordination with alliance powers on many fronts of international conflicts.

To mitigate anti-American sentiment and improve its image around the world, the U.S. government has over the years engaged in public relation type activity to get its “true message” out to the world. For example, within a month after the September 11 attacks, a former advertising executive with more than forty years of experience, Charlotte Beers assumed the position of Under Secretary of State for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy. The Senate and House held hearings injected \$497 million annually into the budget of public diplomacy while passing the new “Freedom Promotion Act of 2002.” To assess popular sentiments in foreign policy making, the U.S. State Department regularly conducts surveys in foreign countries to gauge their perceptions of the U.S.

Although such efforts can be useful for U.S. public diplomacy, one area that requires better attention is media messages in local foreign news outlets. In the case of South Korea, as shown above, the media has undoubtedly been a key player in alliance politics. They have not only devoted extensive coverage to the U.S.-ROK alliance but coverage has also increased over the years, suggesting that it has become a contested issue within South Korea. As both the 2002 school girl deaths and 2008 beef protests showed, the Korean media, especially the progressive one that gained substantial influence during the administrations of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun, was instrumental in provoking public protests and exacting U.S. concessions.

In addition and perhaps more significantly, the Korea media have diverged significantly in their views of alliance, fueling intense debate between progressive and conservative forces. This is certainly consistent with a larger tendency in Korean society

that is sharply divided in views of critical policy issues (both domestic and foreign) by generation and political ideology. The deep divide and heated debates in the Korean media reflect more than just different opinions—the division appears to be related to different identities vis-à-vis the North and US, which are formed and reinforced through intense debates through the mass media. This explains why public debates in the Korean media over the alliance are so emotionally charged, nearly impossible for consensus, and reminiscent of ethnic conflict in multi-ethnic societies.

The general clash of identities within South Korea latently presents a most intractable and fundamental challenge to both US and South Korea as they seek to manage the strained alliance. With change of power to conservatives, strains in the alliance seem to have significantly been repaired. The Lee and Obama administrations currently enjoy close policy consultation and collaboration and there is much hope in both countries for the future of the alliance. However, as long as the Korean media remain sharply divided and continue to engage in contentious politics of identity over key issues related to U.S.-ROK alliance, it is unlikely that South Korean conflicting identities will be abated in the near future and American policy makers must be aware of that.

Finally, this paper demonstrates the importance of recognizing an asymmetry of attention that exists between the U.S. and South Korea. Even though there remains an obvious disparity between national power and military capabilities of the two allies, another important aspect of “asymmetry” in U.S.-ROK ties concerns attention to the purpose for and goals of the alliance. Here, South Korea holds a clear edge. The asymmetry in media attention then significantly affects the bi-lateral relationship. Besides providing the readers with factual information on key events and issues, news

coverage casts the spotlight of public attention on previously obscure or undisputed issues. Indeed, as the former senior official David Straub who served at the U.S. embassy in Seoul during the school girl accident, points out, South Korea is enabled to frame issues and set the agenda “for the bilateral relationship to a significant degree, despite the United States’ being the more powerful player.”³⁵ Recognizing asymmetrical attention is crucial to understanding the contemporary dynamics within the U.S.-ROK alliance.

More attention, however, does not necessarily mean a better understanding of the issues at stake. While the US media “underplayed” much of the schoolgirl tragedy and 2008 beef protests, South Korea was accused of “exaggerating its risks and opportunities” in both situations. When excessive media attention is based on misinformation or overly normative judgments, there is ample potential to adversely affect otherwise sound relational dynamics within the alliance. Nonetheless, the perceived U.S. “insensitivity” propelled South Korean public resentment, thereby eventually forcing a U.S. concession.

From a broader theoretical standpoint, the U.S.-ROK alliance cannot simply be defined by the realist analytical framework of power and security. An asymmetry of attention should be a point of new focus to widen the scope for the general alliance politics debate. While the U.S.-ROK alliance was formed as a relationship between patron and client, as South Korea develops and produces a more liberal society, alliance dynamics are subject to change. As shown above, an asymmetry in media attention to the alliance has altered the terms of reference such that the “power gap” is no longer the defining attribute of the alliance structure. And this has added significance in South Korea where the media is a key player in alliance politics.

¹ This paper was presented at a workshop on “Influence and Role of Domestic Stakeholders on the U.S.-ROK Alliance” co-sponsored by the East Asia Institute and Asia Foundation in Seoul on February 22, 2010. Parts of the paper are taken from my new book *One Alliance, Two Lenses: U.S.-Korea Relations in a New Era* (Stanford University Press, 2010). I’m very grateful to Hilary Izatt for her research and writing assistance.

² Norman D. Levin and Yong-Sup Han, *Sunshine in Korea: The South Korean Debate over Policies toward North Korea* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2002); Eric V. Larson, Norman D. Levin, Seonhae Baik, and Bogdan Savych. *Ambivalent Allies? A Study of South Korean Attitudes toward the U.S.* (San Diego, CA: RAND, 2004). Scott Snyder, “The Role of the Media and the U.S.-ROK Relationship,” in *Strategy and Sentiment: South Korean Views of the United States and the U.S.-ROK Alliance*, ed. Derek Mitchell, 73–81 (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2004).

³ For a discussion regarding the direct influence of the news on public policy decisions, see David K. Perry, “The Image Gap: How International News Affects Perceptions of Nations,” *Journalism Quarterly* 64 (1987): 416–21; and David K. Perry, “The Mass Media and Inference about Other Nations,” *Communication Research* 12 (1985); Albritton and Manheim (1983 and 1984) discuss specifically how exposure to various news media outlets plays a key role in perception formation of foreign nations. See: Robert B. Albritton and Jarol B. Manheim, “News of Rhodesia: The Impact of a Public Relations Campaign,” *Journalism Quarterly* 60 (1983): 622–28; Robert B. Albritton and Jarol B. Manheim, “Changing National Images: International Public

Relations and Media Agenda Setting,” *American Political Science Review* 78, no. 3 (September 1984): 641–57

⁴ For instance, see Philip J. Powlick, “The Sources of Public Opinion for American Foreign Policy Officials,” *International Studies Quarterly* 39 (1995): 427–51

⁵ Gilbert Rozman, *Northeast Asia’s Stunted Regionalism: Bilateral Distrust in the Shadow of Globalization* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 364

⁶ Although the media have an agenda-setting capacity, many journalists contend that the government also affects the media’s selection and coverage of key issues. See David Sanger, “Covering North Korea’s Nuclear Program: A Very Different WMD Problem,” pp. 119-128 in Donald MacIntyre, Daniel Sneider, and Gi-Wook Shin eds, *First Drafts of Korea: The U.S. Media and Perceptions of the Last Cold War Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2009).

⁷ See Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); David K. Perry, (1985 and 1987); Albritton and Manheim, (1983 and 1984).

⁸ See Bruce Russett, “Doves, Hawks, and U.S. Public Opinion,” *Political Science Quarterly* 105, no. 4 (1990): 515–38; Philip Powlick, “The Attitudinal Bases for Responsiveness to Public Opinion among American Foreign Policy Officials,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35, no. 4 (1991): 611–41.

⁹ Leonard A. Kusnitz, *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: America’s China Policy 1949–1979* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984).

¹⁰ Alan D. Monroe, “Consistency between Public Preferences and National Policy Decisions,” *American Politics Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (1979): 3–19; Benjamin I. Page and

Robert Y. Shapiro, "Effects of Public Opinion on Policy," *American Political Science Review* 77, no.1 (1983): 175–90.

¹¹ Cohen (1973); and Powlick (1995).

¹² See John Zaller, *A Theory of Media Politics: How the Interests of Politicians, Journalists, and Citizens Shape the News*, draft copy,

<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/zaller/media%20politics%20book%20.pdf>

¹³ See Snyder (2004).

¹⁴ *USA Today* is distributed nationwide, but its limited circulation makes it a secondary newspaper, at most, in all areas of the country. It is also worth noting that circulation figures do not capture the Internet readership of newspapers.

¹⁵ See Shin, *One Alliance Two Lenses: U.S.-Korea Relations in a New Era*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

¹⁶ The main U.S. news organizations that have bureaus in South Korea are wires and the *Wall Street Journal*. Most others, including the *New York Times*, use stringers there.

¹⁷ See Shin (2010)

¹⁸ The influence of other news outlets like the internet and television have a definitive role in molding the public's awareness and opinion about an issue, particularly in South Korea where online blogging has been used to mobilize the public. For my purpose here though, systematizing news articles is much more efficient than perusing a limitless number of blogs and TV recordings and such is outside of the scope of this study.

¹⁹ See Chapter 2 in Shin (2010) for detailed discussion of the data and method.

²⁰ The U.S. media accorded less than one-quarter of ROK-related coverage to U.S.-ROK relations. See Chapter 5 in Shin (2010).

²¹ “Hankyoreh Sides with Ruling Camp, Other Dailies Support Opposition,” Yonhap News Agency, July 14, 2000; and “ROK Summit Coverage Rekindles Debate between Liberals, Conservatives,” Yonhap News Agency, June 15, 2000.

²² David Straub, “Public Diplomacy and the Korean Peninsula,” pp. 129-140 pp. 119-128 in Donald MacIntyre, Daniel Sneider, and Gi-Wook Shin eds, *First Drafts of Korea: The U.S. Media and Perceptions of the Last Cold War Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2009).

²³ Sung Joo Han, “Perceived Korean Thaw Draws Diplomatic Challenges,” *Korea Herald*, August 8, 2000.

²⁴ Snyder (2004).

²⁵ “ROK Summit Coverage Rekindles Debate between Liberals, Conservatives,” Yonhap News Agency (2000).

²⁶ Daniel Sneider, “Strategic Abandonment: Alliance Relations in Northeast Asia in the Post-Iraq Era” (paper presented at the annual symposium of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy and the Korea Economic Institute, September 2007).

²⁷ For a complete description of how “othering” shapes state identity, see Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: “The East” in European Identity Formation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

²⁸ http://www.yonip.com/main/articles/declaration_on_current_situation.html

²⁹ http://www1.korea-np.co.jp/pk/187th_issue/2002121402.htm

³⁰ Doug Struck, “Democracy, Anti-Americanism, and Korean Nationalism,” in *First Drafts of Korea: The U.S. Media and Perceptions of the Last Cold War Frontier*, eds., Donald A.L. Macintyre, Daniel C. Seider, and Gi-Wook Shin, (Stanford: Shorenstein

APARC), 62. Shin and Izatt (2010) quantify this disparity by reporting the numbers of articles covering the issue in newspapers from both Korea and the U.S. The *Chosun Ilbo* and *Hankyreh* issued well over 200 stories on the topic each while only 19 articles were found in the *New York Times*, 9 from the *Washington Post* and none from the *Wall Street Journal*. See Gi-Wook Shin and Hilary Izatt, "Asymmetry of Attention and Role Reversals in Alliances: the U.S.-ROK Case," unpublished manuscript, Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University.

³¹ Donald Kirk, "South Korea's beef protests: Lee's woes deepen," *Christian Science Monitor*, 12, (www.csmonitor.com/2008/0611/p12s01-woap.htm?print=true)

³² Steven R. Weisman, U.S. Said to Compromise on Beef for South Korea, *New York Times* (20 June 2008), at <
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/20/washington/20trade.html?_r=2&ref=world&oref=slogin> (accessed 12 November 2009).

³³ Shin and Izatt's study illustrates a similar disparity in coverage between the two allies during the beef protests: For example, all three aforementioned U.S. dailies yielded counts all under 50. Conversely, both Korean newspapers exhibited almost ten times more than the highest quantity in a US paper (42 total articles reported in the *New York Times*). See Shin and Izatt (2010), 22.

³⁴ The Pew Research Center For The People & The Press, 2003.

³⁵ David Straub, "Public Diplomacy and the Korean Peninsula," in *First Drafts of Korea: The U.S. Media and Perceptions of the Last Cold War Frontier*, eds., Donald A.L. Macintyre, Daniel C. Sneider, and Gi-Wook Shin (Stanford: Shorenstein APARC: 2009), 133.