Chapter One
INTRODUCTION

THE ROOTS OF KOREAN SECURITY PERSPECTIVES

For decades, South Koreans\(^1\) exhibited both deep anxieties and relatively set convictions about their national security. Their anxieties stemmed from the constant threat of North Korean aggression and related uncertainties about U.S. assistance. The chief convictions, explicit or implicit, were (1) that the primary South Korean policy goal beyond deterring North Korean military actions should be to expedite reunification; (2) that Japan represents the major long-term threat to Korean security; and (3) that a large and enduring U.S. military presence is essential for both Korean and regional security. South Korean security policy was in large measure a product of these anxieties and convictions.

Both feelings were rooted in objective conditions. These start with national division, involving the physical bifurcation of the Korean Peninsula and establishment in the north of an unreconstructed Communist government determined to bring the entire peninsula under its control. The conditions include the extraordinary North Korean military buildup and demonstrable willingness to take risks to achieve this fundamental objective; the persistent quantitative military inferiority of South Korea in the face of Pyongyang's sustained buildup; and the mixed signals that U.S. policy conveyed at different points in the post-World War II period about the perceived importance of Korea to U.S. national interests.

\(^1\)In this report, the words Koreans and South Koreans are used interchangeably.
The broader historical legacy, however, also weighed heavily on Korean attitudes. Particularly significant was Korea’s pre-World War II experience as a colony of Japan. As reflected in the decades-long South Korean ban on the importation of Japanese movies and other cultural products, this experience seared the South Korean consciousness. Also important were Republic of Korea (ROK) encounters with North Korean brutality during the Korean War. Together with Pyongyang’s terrorist and other efforts to subvert South Korea thereafter, these encounters gave South Koreans a direct, firsthand experience with Communism and helped shape South Korean attitudes for several generations.

The overarching theme emerging from the 1999 poll findings is that South Koreans are beginning to move beyond both the historical and Cold War legacies in their thinking about Korea’s long-term security. While important elements of continuity need to be emphasized, there are also signs of movement that could—if sustained—have significant policy implications.

**THE CURRENT SETTING**

That there might be movement in Korean attitudes is not entirely surprising. For South Koreans, the period since the first survey was conducted in 1996 has been one of extraordinary change and challenge. Although reviewing all of the important events that transpired during this period is beyond the scope of this report, four major developments can be highlighted to set the stage for an analysis of the 1999 poll findings.²

First was the Asian financial crisis that broke out in mid-1997. By the end of that year the crisis had spread to South Korea, bringing the country to the verge of bankruptcy and forcing the government to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a $57 billion bailout package. The economic consequences were both immediate and far-reaching. South Korea’s real gross domestic product (GDP) plunged to –6 percent in 1998 (following +5.5 percent growth in

²For more extended treatment of recent developments, from which several of the following points are drawn, see Norman D. Levin, The Two Koreas in 1998: Dealing with Adversity, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, P-8038, 1999.
The Korean currency plummeted from around 800 won to the U.S. dollar in the fall of 1997 to over 1,700 won to $1 by the beginning of 1998, before climbing back to around 1,200 won to $1 by the end of the year. And unemployment shot up to nearly 7 percent in 1998, more than twice the average of the previous 17 years.

By February 1999 the economy showed incipient signs of recovery, with the exchange rate stabilizing, both foreign direct investment and foreign currency reserves rising to new record levels, and the economy appearing likely to resume positive growth (1 to 2 percent projected for 1999). Still, economic hardship was pervasive as unemployment continued to rise and South Korean institutions pursued extensive reform and restructuring programs. Although cautious optimism reappeared, few observers believed that the country was fully out of trouble.

A second important development was the election of Kim Dae Jung as South Korea’s president in December 1997. Kim’s inauguration in February 1998 was a historic event for South Korea. Not only did it represent the first peaceful transfer of power to the political opposition in South Korean history, but it also brought to power a man who for more than a quarter-century embodied the struggle against South Korea’s authoritarian system.

The significance of the election is most evident in a radically new set of South Korean policies, particularly those designed to reform and restructure the South Korean economy and foster steps (under the so-called sunshine policy) toward peaceful coexistence with North Korea. Less evident, but at least equally significant, is that Kim’s election precipitated a major shift in the ruling elite’s social and ideological center of gravity. With Kim’s inauguration, new and far more liberal leaders came to fill important positions in all parts of the Korean establishment. These leaders used their positions in government, the media, and other institutions to promulgate new attitudes and approaches on a range of domestic and foreign policy issues.

A third development was the continued economic decline of North Korea. After seven straight years of negative growth, real GDP growth declined by another 6.8 percent in 1997, the worst shrinkage since the 7.7 percent decline in 1992. Most outside observers believe that the economy declined further in 1998, with widespread reports ap-
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appearing of North Koreans cannibalizing industrial plants and scrap-
ing machinery for food or hard currency.

International attention focused increasingly on the most conspicu-
ous aspect of this economic decline—mass hunger and malnutrition. 
Less conspicuous was another effect: an increasingly apparent dete-
rioration in North Korea’s conventional military capabilities. Re-
source constraints began to pinch North Korean arms production 
and generate a force structure plagued by antiquated weapons, while 
shortages of food, fuel, and spare parts adversely affected the mili-
tary’s readiness and sustainability. Such difficulties increasingly 
raised questions about Pyongyang’s ability to achieve its military 
strategy of rapidly overrunning South Korea and achieving unifica-
tion on North Korean terms before the arrival of U.S. assistance.

By early 1999, many observers came to see North Korea’s increasing 
emphasis on missiles—symbolized most dramatically by its August 
1998 launch of a long-range ballistic missile over Japan—and 
weapons of mass destruction as at least partly related to this decline 
in its conventional military capabilities. They also saw a possible 
linkage between this decline and the sharp increase over the past few 
years in North Korean rhetorical belligerence (including threats to 
turn Seoul into a “sea of fire” and “mercilessly annihilate” the “South 
Korean puppets”) and armed infiltration.

A fourth important development was the breakthrough in South 
Korean–Japanese relations achieved during President Kim’s visit to 
Tokyo in October 1998. For many South Koreans, the formal, written 
Japanese apology for Tokyo’s nearly four decades-long colonial rule 
over Korea prior to the end of World War II was the highlight of this 
visit. The policy significance, however, came from a joint declaration 
signed by President Kim and Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, in which 
the two countries formally pledged to put the past behind them and 
establish a “new partnership for the 21st century.” Backing up this 
pledge, they signed a 43-point “joint action plan” aimed at expand-
ing political dialogue, cultural exchanges, and economic and security 
cooperation. A Japanese pledge to provide $3 billion in loans to help 
South Korea overcome its financial crisis capped a summit meeting 
that many observers viewed as being potentially historic.
These developments provide the general context in which the 1999 survey was conducted. The next section analyzes the findings. After describing the responses to a few “thermometer” questions designed to measure the current state of South Korean security anxieties, the report groups findings in four analytical categories: unification, security, the major powers, and economics. The final section draws several broad conclusions and explores potential implications.