In this world of constant change, there is no change in one constant: Reading polls requires caution. Not only are poll findings frequently subject to multiple interpretations, the raw data are often affected by the selection and wording of individual questions. In particular, too much should not be read into the results of any single survey. Moods can change widely in response to events or new conditions. Even the findings from two comparable surveys should not be overemphasized: While several data points may constitute a trend, the most that can be inferred from two surveys is movement from one point to another.

Nevertheless, like a crack in ice, such movement suggests a change in tendency. As such, it is worth noting. Our February 1999 survey suggests potentially significant movement in almost all areas of South Korea’s traditional security perspectives.

At the most basic level, South Korean security anxieties appear to have significantly abated. While South Koreans continue to take seriously the potential for North Korean aggression, the persistent anxiety that tended to characterize South Korean security perceptions increasingly appears to be taking on a “that was then, this is now” quality. Indeed, the general mood conveys not anxiety but self-assurance. South Koreans are not hunkering down in the face of North Korean saber rattling and South Korea’s own financial crisis but opening up, increasingly confident about their place in the regional and global orders. This confidence appears to increase, moreover, as Koreans look further into the future.
If their fundamental anxieties are diminishing, the relatively set convictions that have heretofore characterized South Korean security views also appear to be undergoing changes:

- Koreans are decidedly and increasingly hesitant about unification. While they retain a deep emotional commitment to this long-term objective, Koreans increasingly describe themselves as neither particularly eager for unification nor optimistic that it will happen anytime soon. In the process, they seem not only to accept but also to favor a general continuation of the status quo.

- Attitudes toward Japan are dramatically improving. Not only is the perception of Japan as Korea’s major long-term economic competitor and military threat down significantly, but South Koreans increasingly accept Japan as a legitimate regional and global actor. Indeed, there is a growing sense of Japan as an important security partner. These are perhaps the most salient findings in this year’s poll. The marked attitudinal changes toward Japan both reinforce the public’s reduced anxieties and cloud their view of the long-term threat to Korea’s security.

- Koreans appear more discerning about the role of the U.S.-ROK alliance and dubious about the long-term value of the U.S. regional military presence. South Koreans remain strongly supportive of close relations with the United States and want the alliance to continue even beyond unification. But the perceived linkage between the alliance and regional stability appears to be weakening, as is support for a U.S. military presence in Korea after unification. Support for the broader U.S. regional military presence also appears to be decreasing, as Koreans increasingly evaluate the U.S. role in terms of what it means for Korea’s direct security.

Replacing the traditional anxieties and convictions are greater self-confidence and a sober sense of Korea’s long-term interests. Internally, South Koreans are prepared to bear the burden of unification—although they want the costs to be delayed, minimized, and borne fairly—and support relatively magnanimous policies toward their northern brethren. Externally, they want to maintain close ties with the United States but also keep good relations with all other major powers, continue the security alliance with the United States but
reduce U.S. troops and rely more on their own capabilities for their security, and play an active role in both the world economy and efforts to maintain global peace.

In short, as the South Koreans look at their long-term future, they appear to see a fully “normal” nation, one dealing confidently with its Northern antagonist, operating on more equal terms with the major powers, and making a positive international contribution. Above all, they appear to see their country focusing its policies explicitly on Korean interests. In all these ways, they appear to have begun moving beyond both the historical and Cold War legacies in their security perceptions.

Such movement, if sustained, could have important implications for both U.S. policy and U.S.-ROK security relations. On the side of potential opportunities, increased South Korean confidence could strengthen Western efforts to encourage Pyongyang to pursue tension reduction and peaceful coexistence. Improved public images of Japan could facilitate both expanded Korean-Japanese security cooperation and enhanced coordination among Korea, Japan, and the United States. Moreover, a hardheaded calculation of Korea’s long-term interests could help constrain centrifugal forces that could undermine efforts to maintain close U.S.-Korean security ties beyond unification.

More broadly, an increase in Korean openness to the world and heightened sense of Korea as an important global citizen could facilitate important South Korean contributions to regional and global security. Improved attitudes toward Japan alone could significantly bolster regional stability, while greater South Korean self-assurance could facilitate expanded Korean roles in pursuit of Western security objectives. These opportunities should be developed, nurtured, and strengthened.

At the same time, evolving Korean attitudes could also pose challenges for both the United States and U.S.-ROK security relations. The key short-term challenge is ensuring that Washington and Seoul continue to pursue complementary approaches in their respective dealings with North Korea. While declining threat perceptions may be good for South Korea’s self-assurance, they could complicate efforts to maintain a unified alliance approach toward Pyongyang.
This is directly relevant to maintaining an effective deterrent to potential North Korean aggression, where differences could emerge in the calculus used by the two countries. It is particularly troublesome, however, in regard to North Korea’s nuclear and missile-development programs. While South Korea and the United States share the same basic goals regarding these activities, they do not always accord the same weight to particular manifestations. Nor do they always agree on appropriate responses.

In this regard, pressures building in the United States for a more forceful response should North Korea either fail to resolve suspicions about its nuclear program or launch additional long-range ballistic missiles represent a particularly important danger. The attitudes reflected in our February 1999 survey suggest that South Koreans are likely to resist measures that might risk conflict on the peninsula in the absence of some clear—and direct—North Korean provocation. Managing such potential differences will require skill and effort.

Among long-term challenges, three stand out. The first is to improve South Korean impressions of their standing with and value to the United States. Although the situation appears to be improving somewhat, the same two-thirds of South Koreans in the 1999 poll who think the Chinese respect them think the Americans do not. A whopping 85 percent of South Koreans look at the present U.S.-ROK relationship and fail to see themselves as equal partners. The continued pervasiveness of this view weakens the foundation for an enduring relationship.

To be sure, rectifying such a view will not be easy. As a composite of both objective and subjective factors, and changing only slowly over a long period of time, it will require sustained efforts—particularly at cultural and educational levels.

Having said this, there is much the U.S. government can do. Diplomatic style can be adjusted to convey a greater sense of respect for Korean capabilities and prerogatives. Greater responsibility for North-South issues can be returned to the two Koreas themselves, with the United States stepping back from its current “leading” position and resuming its more traditional posture as a “supporter” of South Korea. And South Koreans can be given the lead even on broader but related issues, such as U.S. food aid to North Korea,
which can easily be channeled through or directed by Seoul. Such efforts could pay large dividends if and as South Korean threat perceptions further diminish.

The second long-term challenge is to find ways to accommodate the growing self-confidence of the South Korean public and desire to play a larger role in their own security. Korean support for acquiring nuclear weapons in the event of a range of external changes is only one of a number of signs suggesting that South Koreans are increasingly looking to themselves as they think about their future security. The falloff in the perceived value of the U.S.-ROK alliance in providing for regional stability and erosion in support of the U.S. regional military presence more broadly suggest some softness in Korean support for U.S. regional strategy. At a minimum, greater efforts will need to be made to link Western security objectives directly to Korean security interests. Particular efforts may be needed to repackage and sell the rationale underlying the U.S. regional military presence.

The third long-term challenge is to prepare for the period after unification. Although Koreans overwhelmingly want to maintain the U.S.-ROK alliance even after the two Koreas are unified, and the two countries have officially stated precisely this intention, our recent poll suggests that substantial adjustments will be necessary. These involve not simply reconfiguring the U.S. troop presence in Korea but restructuring the alliance itself. Indeed, absent a threat from North Korea, everything from the alliance’s purpose to its military strategy and division of roles will need to be recalibrated. The odds of accomplishing this are likely to be much better if planning is initiated before unification.

In this regard, creating a more direct linkage between the alliance and regional stability is critical. The absence of such a linkage will seriously exacerbate the task of sustaining the alliance after unification. Toward this end, a strategic dialogue is needed to create greater U.S.-ROK consensus on long-term security issues. Included should be potential steps to give the alliance a more regional focus. Establishing home-porting arrangements for U.S. naval vessels in South Korea, for example, could be considered as one means for strengthening the link between narrowly defined Korean interests and broader U.S. strategic objectives. Developing agreed-upon plans to
reconstitute a U.S. ground presence in South Korea after unification could be another. While long-term in nature, such steps could strengthen the current bilateral relationship. They could also provide a foundation for transitioning to a new, more equal relationship as Korea moves toward and beyond unification.

One central message runs through both the opportunities and the challenges. A Korea that is unified, closely allied with the United States, and—while focusing its security policies on a hardheaded calculation of Korean interests—both open to the world and contributing actively to common Western objectives is the general direction in which Koreans prefer to be headed. Ensuring a successful journey will require not only efforts to keep the road free of major obstacles but also careful attention to shifts taking place beneath the surface.