This report analyzes the results of a February 1999 public opinion poll surveying South Korean attitudes toward long-term security issues. The major conclusion is that Koreans are moving beyond both the historical and Cold War legacies in their thinking about Korea's long-term security.

We found, for example, that:

- Traditional South Korean security anxieties are abating. While South Koreans remain vigilant, anxiety over looming North Korean invasion or subversion is diminishing. The general mood conveys not anxiety but self-assurance, with confidence increasing as Koreans look further into the future.

- Koreans are decidedly and increasingly hesitant about unification. Although they retain a deep emotional commitment to unifying their country, Koreans describe themselves as neither particularly eager for unification nor optimistic that it will happen anytime soon. They seem not only to accept but also favor a general continuation of the status quo.

- Attitudes toward Japan are dramatically improving. A decreased perception of Japan as Korea's arch rival and an increased acceptance of Tokyo as a legitimate regional and global actor are perhaps the most salient findings. Marked attitudinal changes to-
ward Japan reinforce the Korean public’s reduced anxieties and cloud their view of the long-term threat to Korea’s security.

• Koreans are more discerning about the role of the U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance and dubious about the long-term value of the U.S. regional military presence. They support close relations with the United States and want the alliance to continue 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 is down, as Koreans increasingly evaluate the U.S. role in terms of what it means for Korea’s direct security.

The movement in Korean attitudes, if sustained, could have important implications for both U.S. policy and U.S.-ROK security relations. On the side of potential opportunities, continued evolution in the direction described in the report could help further a number of longstanding U.S. objectives. These include encouraging Pyongyang to pursue tension reduction and peaceful coexistence; facilitating expanded Korean-Japanese security cooperation and enhanced coordination among Korea, Japan, and the United States; and constraining centrifugal forces that could undermine efforts to maintain close U.S.-Korean security ties beyond unification. An increase in Korean openness to the world and a heightened sense of Korea as an important global citizen could also facilitate broader South Korean contributions to regional and global security. These opportunities should be developed, nurtured, and strengthened.

At the same time, evolving Korean attitudes could also pose important challenges. The key challenge in the short term is ensuring that Washington and Seoul continue to pursue complementary policies in their 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 most troublesome in regard to North Korea’s nuclear and missile-development programs but could also affect South Korea’s deterrence calculus.
Three long-term challenges stand out:

- Improving South Korean impressions of their standing with and value to the United States. The pervasive Korean view that Americans neither respect them nor treat them as equals undermines the foundation for an enduring alliance.

- Accommodating growing South Korean self-confidence. The apparent South Korean desire to play a larger role in their own security, if not accommodated, will erode the alliance’s perceived value and weaken support for U.S. regional strategy.

- Preparing for the post-unification period. The strong public desire for post-unification adjustments in U.S.-Korean relations within the context of a continuing security alliance can best be addressed if planning is initiated before unification happens.

Addressing these challenges will require sustained, long-term efforts. Potentially large payoffs could come from:

- Adjusting U.S. diplomatic style to convey a greater sense of respect for Korean capabilities and prerogatives.

- Returning greater responsibility for North-South issues to the two Koreas themselves, with the United States returning to a more “supporting” position.

- Giving the U.S.-ROK alliance a more regional focus.

Although long-term in nature, such efforts could strengthen the current bilateral relationship. They could also provide a foundation that can be built upon in transitioning to a new, more “equal” U.S.-Korean relationship.

The bottom line: Ensuring that South Korean security thinking continues to move in a positive direction—and that U.S.-ROK security relations remain on solid ground—will require that careful attention be paid to shifts taking place beneath the surface.