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Asymmetry of power and attention in alliance politics: the US–Republic of Korea case

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ABSTRACT

While power asymmetry typically defines security relationships between allies, there exist other forms of asymmetry that influence alliance politics. In order to illustrate how they can shape policy outcomes that cannot be explained solely through the lens of power capabilities, the authors examine the role of relative attention that each side pays to the alliance. It is their central argument that since the client state has a greater vested interest in the alliance and given that attention depends on interest/need, the client state can leverage attention to get its way. By analysing two specific cases, the 2002 South Korean schoolgirls tragedy and the 2008 beef protests—instances where the South Koreans succeeded in compelling US concessions—the authors show that because the alliance was more central to the client state's agendas, there existed an asymmetry of attention that offered leveraging opportunities for the weaker ally. In this study, the authors emphasise the role of media attention as a key variable, and seek to contribute to debates on weaker party leverage in asymmetrical alliances.

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Introduction

Asymmetry is a major feature of alliance relations. In particular, power asymmetry is central to security relationships between allies (see Lake 2009; Morrow 1991; Snyder 1997). While unequal partners may be able to trade benefits that are complementary (for example, security and autonomy [Morrow 1991]), the stronger ally usually gets what it wants because its opportunity costs of severing the relationship are lower. Yet, that is only if 'all else is equal'. There are also instances of reversal where weaker states can significantly influence alliance dynamics.

Scholars have addressed such situations by examining other forms of asymmetry that influence alliance relations. For instance, Fearon (1994) argues that smaller states will choose to challenge bigger states where there is an asymmetry of interests that will give them a good chance of prevailing: 'when the defender is relatively strong, challengers tend to threaten on issues on which a concerted response by the defender is quite uncertain'. Referring to asymmetry of need (i.e. the extent to which each ally needs the other at a

given point in time to meet pressing security challenges or domestic political imperatives), Ciorciari (2008) contends that 'many US allies—particularly those in hotly contested regions like the Middle East and southern Asia—have had opportunities to reclaim much of the leverage that they lost after the Cold War'. Likewise, Moravcsik (1997) asserts that even in 'least likely cases' where territorial issues and military power are at stake, 'relative capabilities do not necessarily determine outcomes'. Rather, a 'strong preference for certain issues at stake can compensate for a deficiency in capabilities' (Moravcsik 1997, 524; see also Miller 2004).

These works all illustrate the importance of various forms of non-power asymmetries that influence alliance politics, whether it be an asymmetry of interest, need or preference. While power matters to a great extent, there are other forms of asymmetry that can tip the balance in favour of the weaker ally. As a way of further illustrating how such forms of non-power asymmetry work, we examine the role of relative attention that each member state pays to the asymmetrical alliance. Our central argument is that attention depends on interest/need and, as the client state has greater vested interests in the alliance, the client state can leverage attention to get its way—that is, the weaker ally, with the greater attention paid to the alliance, can have considerably more ability to influence the alliance agenda than would otherwise be the case.

In order to support our argument, we empirically examine the US–Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance. The US–ROK alliance has been one of the most enduring asymmetrical security alliances, while also characterised by occasional role reversals—the central theme of this study. It has also seen Korean democratisation and changes in the larger security environment, such as the rise of China. Thus, this study can offer broader theoretical implications for other countries with asymmetrical military alliances that share similar features to the US–ROK alliance.

Politics of asymmetry in alliances

Past research points to a multitude of factors affecting the potential for smaller states to gain leverage over larger states. The literature can be roughly divided into two general categories: systemic and perceptual. First, systemic factors include a broad focus on the role and dynamics that superpowers create within an international relations framework. Rothstein's (1968) seminal argument, for instance, emphasises the factor of power competition. He argues that the more competitive a system is, the more likely a smaller state can retain influence over the other players, irrespective of size. Such competition is more prevalent in multipolar systems, such as those existing in late 1800s and early 1900s Europe. In these instances, states like Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia (also known as the 'Little Entente') were able to retain influence in their security alliances with larger states, such as France. Similarly, Fox (1959) asserts that during times of big-power conflict, smaller states are compelled to choose a side and influence the conflict's outcome because their choices cause incremental shifts in the balance of power. She pinpoints five small European countries during World War II that found themselves in precarious positions as the balance of power in the region began to shift.

Both Rothstein's and Fox's assertions resonate well with more recent cases—especially with South Korea, the subject of this study. For instance, Chõng (2007) suggests that as Seoul and Beijing become more interdependent, South Korea can gain

strategic footing within its alliance with the USA. Lim (2006) also argues that the US–ROK alliance serves as ‘mutually beneficial insurance’ to combat the perceived threat of China’s rise to US security interests. Just as the ROK needs the USA to ensure a military balance of power in the region, the USA needs the ROK as a buffer to foster increased cooperation with the Chinese. This mutual need has levelled, to some extent, the asymmetry within the alliance, redefining the traditional client role of South Korea (see also Kim and Lim 2007).

Second, scholars have noted the importance of perceptual factors in augmenting smaller states’ influence—that is, how one state perceives the other can play a significant role in delineating power and influence in the relational dynamic. Rather than focusing on a ‘balance of power’ scenario, for instance, Jervis and Snyder (1991) advocate a ‘balance of threat’ theory that centres on the importance of respective perceptions among asymmetrically aligned states. In certain circumstances, the authors note, a smaller state can gain leverage over its larger counterpart by retaining a potential threat to break the alliance and align with another state or group of states (see also Walt 1987). Similarly, Wriggins (1992) suggests that as superpowers become overly committed to gaining regional influence, clients can garner leverage over big-power patrons by threatening to seek help from (or form alliances with) other sources (see also Lebow 1997). Since larger powers often rely on a congruence of support from their smaller regional allies, smaller states can gain leveraging opportunities when larger states perceive a potential flight risk among their smaller allies.

The role of perception in asymmetrical relationships is also important to Womack’s (2006) study of the China–Vietnam and Vietnam–Cambodia relationships during the 1970s. Focusing on the effect of disparity on perception, he asserts that the difference in capacities in an asymmetric relationship implies different stakes in the relationship, which in turn leads to different patterns of attention. In his view, asymmetric security relationships will exhibit a ‘politics of over-attention’—a situation in which smaller states pay the majority of attention to bilateral diplomacy while trying to pre-empt their larger counterpart’s next moves. Bigger states, on the other hand, are overcommitted to other security issues, and thus lack the time and capacity to devote as much attention to the relationship relative to their smaller allies. As a result, ‘over-attention’ by the smaller state and ‘inattention’ by the strong state can lead to misperceptions of each other. He also notes that asymmetric misperception is ‘systemic’ because it results from a relational pattern rather than from the characteristics of individual states and their leaders (Womack, 2001, 2003).¹

Asymmetry of attention in alliance politics

Building on the perceptual-factor line of reasoning, we examine how asymmetry of attention can influence alliance relations. As noted earlier, there exist various forms of asymmetry that can affect the alliance. In what follows we closely examine how they can influence the asymmetrical alliance by looking at the role of attention. In this context, we expand on Womack’s work cited above with a focus on the role of media attention in asymmetrical alliance relations.

First, Womack (2003) has made his main theoretical arguments with illustrations from ‘examples of archetypal, pathological asymmetry’ (107), such as China–Vietnam and

Vietnam–Cambodia relations during the 1970s. As he himself acknowledges, however, his model needs to be tested with ‘more normal situations’ (117). In order to fill this gap, we examine one of the most robust and long-standing relations of asymmetric alliance: the US–ROK alliance.

Second, Womack’s model has largely focused on the *amount* of attention. However, it can be argued that what really matters is not just the amount, but also the *intensity* of such attention. In other words, we can expect attention to have a significant impact only when it becomes intense enough to provoke debate and controversy over opinions and policies in the asymmetrical relationship. In addition, Womack has not offered any specific measure (s) of attention other than describing state-policy attention in general terms. In order to address such conceptual and empirical deficiencies, we examine both the amount and intensity of attention with empirical measures.

We do this by focusing on the role of news media, rather than looking at state policy at the general level. There are many potential actors, from civil society to political parties, who can lead the politics of attention, whether this involves competing or collaborating with one another. The media, especially in a democratic society, display the importance of attention in alliances as they can influence public opinion and bring alliance politics to the forefront of public debate. Besides providing readers with factual or descriptive information on key events, media coverage casts the spotlight of public attention on previously obscure or undisputed issues. Quite significantly, the media can frame the terms in which the public debates and evaluates specific policies by promoting a particular view or position.² It is also important to understand the way in which news media prime their consumers to receive the framed story (see Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; Zaller 1992).³ Through these ‘framing’ and ‘priming’ roles, the media often set the agenda for public debate of key policy issues.⁴

Thus, expanding Womack’s works on ‘pathological’ cases to asymmetrical alliance, we argue that different levels of attention to alliance issues stem from an overall difference in interest or need that each party holds in relation to the other regarding the alliance. For the client state, the patron is so crucial to its national security that discussions of the alliance have greater ramifications than they do for the patron ally, and thus tend to focus on the overarching purpose of the bilateral relationship. It follows, then, that the client state not only pays more attention to the alliance, but also has the potential to frame and reframe alliance issues to a major degree, reversing the client–patron roles. For the patron state, in contrast, the alliance is more narrowly defined, often in the context of larger strategic considerations beyond the client state itself. Patron states have less to gain or lose in such relationships, and thus attention to the client state is ‘sporadic and partial’. This generally causes a ‘systemic misperception’ (see Womack 2003), which affects each state’s leadership, media and population in terms of how they perceive the alliance as a whole, and generates a difference in the attention that each state accords to the alliance.

Client states can leverage such disproportion in attention, negotiating alliance issues to their advantage. ‘Over-attention’ by the client state tends to provoke intense debates over alliance issues, while ‘inattention’ by the patron hardly provokes any. The media, particularly in a democratic polity, play a crucial role in the politics of attention. A body of literature demonstrates that exposure to news can significantly influence public opinion on foreign policy issues, as well as perceptions of other nations (Albritton and Mannheim 1984; Iyengar 1991; Perry 1985, 1987). Public opinion, long thought to be

largely irrelevant to foreign policy decision-making, has increasingly been accepted as a significant factor in its formation (see Aldrich et al. 2006; Gelpi, Reifler, and Feaver 2007; Powlick 1991; Russett 1990). As the client state accords much more attention in both amount and intensity to the alliance than its patron, the client can influence the bilateral relationship beyond its raw power capability. Thus, just as the overcommitment of patron allies can create potential leveraging opportunities for client states to garner influence, so too can the extent and intensity of attention paid to the alliance facilitate the weaker states' ability to influence relational dynamics.

In this article, we examine the role of media attention within asymmetrical alliances by analysing one of the most enduring asymmetrical security alliances to date: the US–ROK alliance. Our central argument is that *there exists an asymmetry of attention in favour of South Korea that offers a leveraging point for the country, despite unfavourable asymmetry of power vis-à-vis the USA*—that is, the public/media of the less powerful country, with the greater attention paid to the alliance relationship, can have considerably more ability to influence the alliance agenda than would otherwise be the case. As the US–ROK alliance has been a typical case of asymmetrical alliances, this study has broader theoretical implications for other countries with asymmetrical military alliances.

In what follows, we first offer a brief overview of how the patron–client relationship has evolved over time, especially during the period of South Korean democratisation, the end of the Cold War and inter-Korean reconciliation. Next, we present statistical evidence to show how increased coverage and subsequently heated debates in the South Korean press have engendered an asymmetry of attention to the alliance. We then examine two cases that seriously affected the alliance: the 2002 South Korean schoolgirls tragedy and the 2008 beef protests. Both issues garnered much more attention in the South Korean media, which were instrumental in provoking public reaction and protests, and eventually played a role in compelling a US concession. Our study shows the utility of media attention as a key variable in explaining relational dynamics in asymmetrical alliances.

The evolution of the US–ROK alliance

At its inception, the US–ROK alliance was an archetypal case of the realist demarcation of patron–client roles. The USA was the primary agenda-setter, and South Korea conceded, largely due to security concerns. In the aftermath of the three-year Korean War, it is fair to say that South Korea became a US client in 'a wide range of military, diplomatic, and economic affairs' (Lee 2006, 37). While the USA had a vested interest in the stability of the newly formed state, South Korea was, more importantly, an 'essential link in its regional anti-Communist containment system' in North-East Asia (ibid.).

By the late 1970s and 1980s, however, significant changes began to transform the relational dynamics between the two countries. In particular, South Korea's economic development brought increased political liberalisation, fostering the expansion of civil society and democratic institutions. Democratising South Korean society nurtured a freer press, which led the debate over the US–ROK alliance. The progressive newspaper the *Hankyoreh Daily*, for instance, was created in this political context as 'the paper of the people' that would not cater to the interests of the authoritarian regime. It was easier for Korean leaders to downplay public anger during the authoritarian era, but, with

democratisation, it became much more difficult to ignore public attention raised and mobilised by the media, as illustrated below.

South Korean democratisation also coincided with the end of the Cold War, promoting a rethinking of anti-communism, which had thus far served as the singular ideological basis of the US–ROK military alliance. In this changing geopolitical environment, South Korea normalised relations with Russia and China, while diversifying the national discourse on a number of key issues, including North Korea and inter-Korean relations (see Kim 2000). President Kim Dae-jung's 'Sunshine Policy', which promoted engagement and eventual reconciliation with the North, further facilitated this post-Cold War thinking, provoking fierce contention surrounding the US military presence on the peninsula. Thus, as South Koreans were searching for a new national identity in the post-Cold War era, the US–ROK alliance became a major issue of national debate, and the media played a key role, as shown below.

Contention over the structure and goals of the US–ROK alliance grew stronger in the post-September 11 era. In particular, the conservative George W. Bush administration and the progressive Roh Moo-hyun government had different views of the North Korean nuclear threat—the key rationale for the alliance. When Washington proclaimed North Korea to be a member of the 'Axis of Evil' and regarded sceptically Seoul's reconciliatory policy towards the North, the progressive Roh administration vowed to continue inter-Korean engagement and to strive for greater 'equality' in the US–ROK relationship. Shifting views of the North triggered a corresponding change in South Korean views of the relationship, as the need for the US security guarantee was no longer as sharply felt as it had been in the past. The two governments became increasingly out of sync, leading to disputes over the very issue that had formed the core of the alliance in the first place. As Cha (2004, 151) observes: 'At the heart of this gap are parallel paradigm shifts in foreign policy that have taken place in Washington and Seoul', in the post-September 11 and post-Sunshine era, respectively.⁵

While South Koreans fiercely debated the nature and future of the alliance, the USA could not afford to pay full attention to such issues. Washington policy officials were concerned with the tides of change sweeping over South Korea, but the USA was preoccupied with its war on global terrorism (Sanger 2009). One good example of the effects of the overextension of the US foreign policy agenda is *New York Times* journalist David Sanger's account of covering North Korea during the George W. Bush administration. He argues that because 'the president wanted to focus American attention elsewhere, journalists found it extremely difficult to spark much interest in the strategic implications of a North Korea with eight or more weapons' (Sanger 2009, 120–21). There was no national debate about redefining the alliance with South Korea in the USA, and discussions were sporadic and tended to be narrow in scope, about certain elements of alliance management such as the redeployment of US troops from South Korea to Iraq. Compared to South Korea, a lack of public attention made it easier for US leaders to compromise.

Thus, in the mid-2000s, the most striking 'asymmetry' in US–ROK ties was not so much about 'power' as it was about attention to the essence and goals of the alliance. Here, South Korea held the comparative advantage.⁶ In particular, a freer press, which had been stifled during the authoritarian years, led the national debate in seeking to push South Korea to act outside of its traditional client role. Even though there remains

an obvious disparity in the material capabilities of the two allies, the terms of reference have been altered such that the ‘power gap’ is no longer the defining attribute of the alliance. The following section measures the level of this asymmetry of attention in the media and details how it has influenced the dynamics of the US–ROK alliance.

Asymmetry of power versus asymmetry of attention

The US–ROK alliance clearly displays different levels of asymmetry with regard to power and attention. In terms of military and economic power capabilities, the alliance continues to be highly asymmetric. In addition to its 16-times-greater gross domestic product (GDP), the USA greatly outspends South Korea militarily (24.5 times more in 1994 and 17 times more in 2014). Perhaps the most telling indicator of this disparity is the fact that a four-star US general still holds wartime operational control over the ROK military forces. No doubt, the USA maintains dominance over South Korea in terms of hard power. This did not change much over the course of the study period (1994–2003) and remains the case even today, as shown in Table 1.

Still, the contemporary relational dynamic of the alliance cannot be examined solely through the lens of capabilities. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the amount and intensity of South Korean news attention to the USA and vice versa, from 1993 to 2003, based on three US and two South Korean newspapers.⁷ The disparity in coverage is stark, especially regarding the US–ROK relationship. On average, the South Korean newspapers published about 1.6 times as many articles on the USA (1012) as the US newspapers published on the ROK (630). Additionally, the South Korean newspapers published four times as many articles about US–ROK relations (610) as the US newspapers did (151) (see Figure 1). Yet what is more striking is the different levels of intensity of media attention measured by opinion pieces. In the forms of editorials and opinion columns, the media offer *evaluative* or *analytical* statements beyond *descriptive* or *factual* ones, suggesting how things should or should not be done, often provoking public debate. In this regard, the South Korean press’s coverage of the alliance far exceeds that of the US press. As shown in Figure 2, the South Korean newspapers on average published 56 times the number of editorials and opinion columns on US–ROK relations as the US newspapers did. This finding

Table 1. Power asymmetry in the US–ROK alliance.

Country	USA	ROK	USA	ROK	USA	ROK
Year	1994	1994	2003	2003	2014	2014
<i>Demographics</i>						
Population (ratio)	5.9	1	6	1	6.3	1
Population growth (annual percent)	1.2	1	0.9	0.5	0.75	0.4
Surface area (square kilometres)	97	1	97	1	97	1
<i>Military</i>						
Total military spending (ratio)	24.5	1	23	1	17	1
Military spending as percentage of total world military spending	39	1.6	39	1.7	35	2.1
Military spending as percentage of GDP	4.1	3.2	3.7	2.5	3.5	2.6
World rank in military spending	1st	13th	1st	12th	1st	10th
<i>Economics</i>						
GDP (trillion US\$)	16	1	17	1	15	1.4
Gross national income (per capita in current US\$, US–ROK ratio)	2.7	1	3	1	1.93 ^a	1 ^a

^a2013 data.

Sources: For military spending data, SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2015.

For demographic and economic data, World Bank 2015.

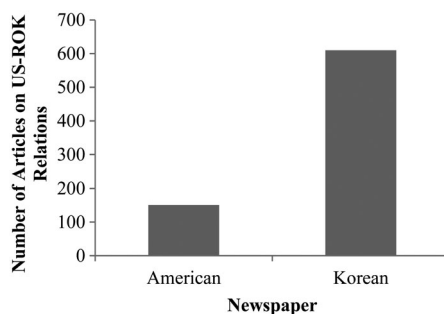


Figure 1. US–ROK relations reported in news articles, 1993–2003.

Source: Shin 2010, 109.

clearly illustrates that while the US–ROK relationship became a major subject of media attention and public debate in South Korea, it did not receive much attention beyond descriptive coverage in the US media. In other words, South Korea pays significantly more attention in terms of both amount and intensity to the alliance than the USA does.

The different levels and intensity of attention to the alliance largely stem from differing national interests in the alliance, which are rooted in historical and structural factors. While the USA plays an important role in ROK security and US troops stationed on the peninsula are a feature of daily life for many South Koreans, the ROK does not guarantee US security, and the alliance rarely touches the lives of average Americans. Not surprisingly, Shin's (2010) study shows that security gets more attention in the South Korean media coverage of US–ROK relations than in the US media. In particular, while US troops constitute the most important issue in South Korea's media coverage of the alliance, the subject is hardly mentioned in the US media. To South Korea, the USA is not simply another state in the international system with which its interests frequently converge. Rather, the USA has acted as a 'significant other', or even, perhaps, the most important country to its development, playing a central role in shaping South Korea's national interests and identity since 1945 (see Neumann 1999). On the other hand, for the USA, South

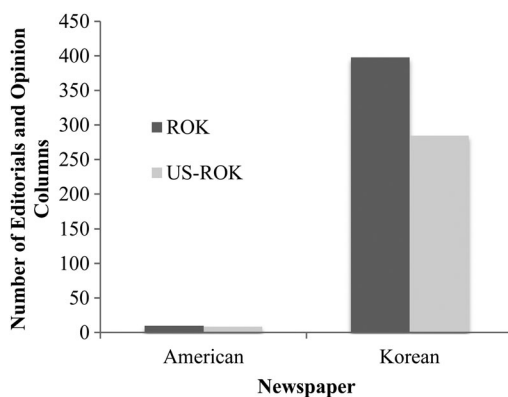


Figure 2. ROK and US–ROK relations reported in editorials and op-eds, 1993–2003.

Source: Shin 2010, 109.

Korea was initially a strategic security bulwark, which has since evolved into an economic partner. South Korea is one of many US allies.

In addition to the varying levels of importance that the alliance plays in each country, the media environments can also mitigate or amplify attention. In the nineteenth-century USA, most newspapers had an informal party affiliation and openly advocated for their party's candidates. The USA's media environment has evolved significantly since then, however, and today objectivity, non-partisanship and high standards of journalistic ethics constitute the aims of mainstream media organisations.⁸ In contrast, the contemporary media environment in South Korea is quite similar to that of the nineteenth-century USA. The South Korean news media are sharply divided on key policy issues—both domestic and foreign—in accordance with their ideological leanings. Snyder (2004), among others, points out that 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. The Korean media's deep divide tends to amplify the extent of attention, leading to heated debates, which, in turn, may affect public opinion on alliance issues.

Thus, it is not surprising that alliance issues are featured much more prominently in the South Korean press than in the US press. In addition, the South Korean media are often evaluative in their coverage of US-related issues, while the US media's coverage of South Korean affairs is largely descriptive. In light of these factors, it is logical to expect more heated debates on US–ROK relations in South Korean newspapers than in US newspapers, affecting public opinion. In what follows, we use two case studies to show how the South Korean media framed and primed issues in ways that provoked public reactions, which, in turn, amplified pressures on the USA for concessions that would have been otherwise unlikely.

Case studies

In order to illustrate how media attention was leveraged to influence the US–ROK alliance, we examine two specific cases: the 2002 schoolgirls tragedy and the 2008 beef protests. The first case dealt directly with alliance issues, while the second did not. Also, the former occurred towards the end of the progressive Kim Dae-jung government, while the latter took place in the early days of the conservative Lee Myung-bak administration. Nonetheless, in both cases, South Koreans' (perceived) view of their nation's unequal relations with the USA was the underlying cause. Also, in both cases, extensive media attention in South Korea provoked public reaction to the issues, with political pressure (either directly on the patron state or indirectly through the client state) being substantial enough to bring about a US concession. Thus, close analysis of these two cases that occurred in different political contexts (progressive versus conservative administrations) on issues of varying relevance to the alliance (directly or indirectly related), but with similar outcomes of a US concession to South Korean demands, illustrates well the importance of asymmetry of attention in alliance relations.⁹

The schoolgirls tragedy

In June 2002, during a US military training operation on a base just outside of Seoul, an army tank accidentally struck and killed two junior high school students—Shim Mi-sun

and Shin Hyo-sun—who were walking on the edge of a very narrow road. When the tank adjusted to allow incoming traffic to pass, the two girls were caught in the driver's blind spot and, as a result of faulty communications equipment, the officer in front was unable to warn the driver. Both girls were killed instantly.

The USA responded immediately with clear expressions of regret and condolences from top US officials. That same evening, United States Forces Korea (USFK) officials visited the victims' families, provided funeral money, and promised future endowments. Additionally, over 400 soldiers, numerous high-ranking USFK officers and US embassy personnel attended a memorial service for the girls that was held at the base. In a personal communication sent to the authors on August 5, 2015, David Straub, a senior official at the US embassy in Seoul at the time, recalled: 'the American embassy and USFK leadership *pre-emptively* sought to respond to *anticipated* Korean media/public outrage to the traffic accident' (see also Straub 2015).

Initially, the US response seemed to work. At the time, the South Korean media did not cover the memorial service and mentioned the deaths only in secondary coverage; the major news stories were the 2002 Korea–Japan World Cup and the resolution of an accidental clash with the North Korean Navy. However, in the coming weeks and months, the situation aroused a media frenzy in South Korea, which sparked what would be considered the 'strongest anti-Americanism in South Korean history' up to that point (Robertson 2003): Catholic priests went on a hunger strike, and tens of thousands of South Koreans—not just activists, but also middle-class adults—protested against the USA, while 'progressive' (i.e. liberal or left-leaning) presidential candidate Roh Moo-hyun delivered a campaign speech under the banner of 'Yankee Go Home!' Even the conservative candidate, Lee Hoi-chang, who had proudly demonstrated his close ties to the USA by visiting Washington early in his campaign, later distanced himself from his country's traditional ally in response to the clear sentiment of the nation. Many saw this as a striking manifestation of the younger generation of South Koreans' readiness to question the traditional patron–client relationship, which had been the status quo since the 1950s (Kim and Lim 2007).

How did an incident that was largely overlooked by the media in the beginning eventually provoke such a massive public outcry? In answering this question, we need to note the framing and priming role of the newly established progressive online newspaper *OhMyNews*.¹⁰ Equipped with the mantra 'All Citizens Are Journalists', this liberal news outlet relies mainly on contributions from citizens around the country connected through the Internet. Initially, an *OhMyNews* citizen journalist wrote about the incident weeks before it was picked up in the mainstream media. The story was extensively discussed and hotly debated in online forums, posted and reposted on websites, and provoked a large amount of attention and anger from citizens (Chang 2005). *OhMyNews* set the overall tone, creating a particular frame that prompted mainstream news outlets to cover the issue (Song 2007). At first, the focus was on stories regarding the actual incident and investigation. However, as the media's attention expanded with growing intensity, the incident became nothing more than an 'iconic event that created controversies over more fundamental issues', such as South Korea's unequal alliance relationship with the USA (Song 2007, 84).

Central to the South Korean popular and progressive-led anger was the US military's perceived attempt to 'brush off responsibility' by refusing to give up jurisdiction in

trying the two soldiers responsible for the tragedy and acquitting both on the lowest charge of negligent homicide. For many South Koreans, this was a clear indication of their nation's unequal relationship with the USA. Demanding an official apology for the deaths and subsequent controversial verdicts, the South Korean media swarmed over the issue, publishing a wide array of stories on the topic. Many reports instituted an angry call for mobilisation to demand legitimate US 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' (*The People's Korea* 2002). By contrast, the incident did not receive much attention among the US media. During the brunt of the media coverage and public protests in South Korea, the US foreign policy agenda was wholly dedicated to its War on Terror and surge in Iraq (Sanger 2009).

A comparative analysis of the coverage of the incident in the US and South Korean media clearly shows an asymmetry of attention in favour of South Korea. In a Boolean search of the KINDS Database, for the period from June 13, 2002 (the date of the incident) to November 28, 2002 (the day after President George W. Bush's formal apology), the terms '미군 여중생' ('US soldiers schoolgirls') and '미군 여중생 사망' ('US soldiers schoolgirls' deaths') returned 147 and 91 stories in *Hankyoreh*, including 37 and 16 editorials and op-eds, respectively. The same search terms for *Chosun Ilbo* returned similar counts of 141 and 106, including 10 and 6 editorials and op-eds, respectively. These figures take on greater meaning when compared to the article counts for US newspapers. Using the Lexis-Nexis Database for newspapers with a similar search term ('Deaths of Korean schoolgirls') and the same search period, we found a scant six articles in the *New York Times*, two in the *Washington Post* and none in the *Wall Street Journal* (see Figure 3). It is also notable that not a single opinion piece appeared in the three US newspapers regarding this issue. As such, the incident received little attention in the US press, and the articles that did arise tended to focus on concerns about the ensuing anti-American sentiment in South Korea.

In the following months, coverage of the issue was further intensified in South Korea, morphing the news media into a forum for debating the US–ROK alliance, especially US troops' presence on the Korean Peninsula. By 2003, as Figure 4 shows, a dramatic rise in the number of editorials and columns on the US–ROK alliance in both the progressive and conservative dailies illustrates that the debate had reached a new level of aggravation. In particular, the topic of US troops in South Korea sparked great contention between progressives

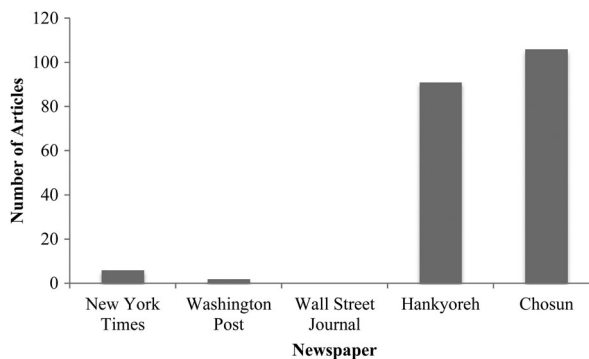


Figure 3. Article counts for the tragedy of the two schoolgirls in South Korea.

Source: LexisNexis Academic (for the New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Washington Post article counts); Korea Integrated News Database System (for Hankyoreh and Chosun Ilbo article counts).

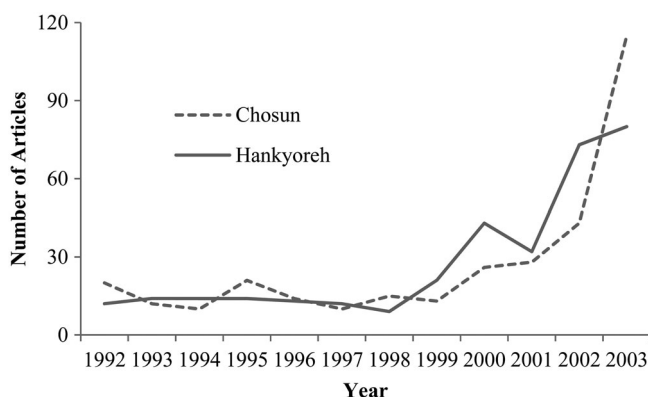


Figure 4. Media attention to US–ROK relations.

Source: Shin 2010, 89.

and conservatives within the South: while both papers published less than 25 pieces per year before 1999, the coverage level had increased fourfold by 2003 (Shin 2010, 91).¹¹

As public debates and protests grew, and the situation became increasingly unstable in South Korea, President Bush issued a formal apology. The succession of condolences and expressions of regret as part of a public relations campaign by US military officials in South Korea, as well as a prior apology made by Secretary of State Colin Powell, had failed to calm the rage (Demick 2002). The protests continued in the form of nationwide vigils, online protests, and boycotts of US products, with slogans such as ‘Retrial of the GIs at a Korean Court’, ‘Renegotiation of the SOFA [Status of Forces Agreement]’, ‘US Troops out of Korea’ and ‘Renegotiate the US–South Korean Relationship’ (Kang 2009, 172). In the end, speaking directly to the South Korean public in November 2002, US Ambassador to South Korea Thomas Hubbard declared:

President Bush, who has visited Korea and has a special feeling for the Korean people, has been touched by this tragedy. 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 (Kirk 2002).

It was the first time a US president had apologised to the Korean people for anything (although Clinton had expressed ‘regret’ over the Nogun-ri killings). The ambassador did not explain why it took four months for a presidential apology to occur, but it is clear that President Bush would not have made it without South Korean anger expressed through media coverage and public protests.¹²

In addition, extensive media attention to this tragic accident provoked a public demand for a change in the SOFA, the legal terms for the US troops in South Korea. Besides the official apology, the USA agreed for the first time to engage in ‘Future of the Alliance’ consultations on the relocation of Yongsan Garrison, along with a variety of other troop-presence and location issues. This included an impromptu taskforce, largely instigated by the South Koreans and composed of both US and ROK officials, to comprehensively review the SOFA, ‘with an eye towards recommending additional ways in which the operation of that agreement can be improved’ (United States Embassy in Seoul 2009).

This tragic incident and its aftermath illustrate that the alliance has evolved from one of simple security and fear of abandonment to a former client being able to make demands on its patron and actually see such demands materialise. While military accidents are not a unique occurrence in the country, such accidents went largely unnoticed in the past, as the news media were under tight control by the authoritarian regime. This time, however, the tragic event received massive media attention, which in turn exerted pressures on the USA to make some important concessions. While it is not easy to measure the extent of their role, considerable media attention and the ensuing public protests played a key part in bringing about these US concessions.

The US beef-importation protests

In a manner reminiscent of the public response to the schoolgirls tragedy, the progressive media camp once again roused a major display of South Korean protest culture six years later—this time over the issue of US beef imports (Shin 2008). Unlike the public outcry over the schoolgirls accident, the beef protests did not directly address alliance issues, as their primary target was the newly established Lee Myung-bak government. Yet they still had important implications for the US–ROK alliance. The protesters saw South Korea's unequal relationship with the USA as the underlying cause of the unfair deal that the Lee government had made regarding US beef importation. Surprised by the vehemence of popular sentiment, President Lee kowtowed to public opinion and, despite an agreement with President Bush, demanded a prohibition on the exportation of beef that was more than 30 months old to Korea. Concerned about its harmful impact on the alliance, the Bush administration reluctantly acquiesced to the ROK's demands. Here, once again, the South Korean media played a key role in provoking public protests by framing the agreement in particular ways that led to another US concession.

When Lee took office in 2008, many of his South Korean opponents feared that the beef issue could become a mechanism to ensure the successful negotiation of a bilateral free trade agreement. US beef in South Korea had been a point of contention since 2003, when a case of mad cow disease was found in Washington State. By 2006, two more cases had been confirmed, unsettling many South Korean consumers, as South Korea represented the third-largest international purchaser of US beef. So, when Lee opened the market to US beef imports following his early summit in Washington with President Bush, progressives latched onto the debate to bolster their contention that Lee was eagerly trying to 'please the United States' at whatever cost to South Korea (Kirk 2008). In the following months, the South Korean media were inundated with stories about the issue, provoking angry reactions from the public.

In particular, the South Korean television station MBC brought the issue to the forefront of public awareness by making it the focus of one of its prime-time news programs. The program began with footage of 'downer cows' in the USA, which was followed by an interview with the mother of a deceased American woman who had 'likely died from mad cow disease'. The commentators then suggested that there was a higher genetic susceptibility to contracting mad cow disease among Koreans, claiming that they were two to three times more likely than other ethnic groups to contract the disease (see 'Mad Cow Thesis' 2008). The program closed by accusing the USA of exporting beef that was unfit for American use from cattle aged over 30 months, and criticised the South Korean government for

its inability to refuse US demands (MBC Broadcasting Station 2008). While several of the claims were disputable, later subjecting the station to numerous lawsuits, the program's central theme was a broad accusation that South Korean policymakers had been overly beholden to US demands, and had been compelled to potentially sacrifice the health of South Korean citizens, reflecting power asymmetry. Shortly after the episode's air date, public protests began to break out. Similarly to the schoolgirls incident, the protests highlighted a growing discontent among South Koreans, especially the younger generation, stemming from their view of the USA as arrogant.¹³

Although it dominated the South Korean media, the episode garnered relatively limited media attention in the USA. For example, using the search term '미국산 쇠고기 수입 반대' ('US beef-import protest'), we found a total of 193 articles, including 20 editorials and op-eds, in *Hankyoreh*, and a total of 292 articles, including 30 editorials and op-eds, in *Chosun Ilbo* during the period from April 18, 2008 to June 21, 2008.¹⁴ By contrast, a search for 'Korean beef protest' in the three US dailies all yielded counts of fewer than 10 (see Figure 5). Each of the two South Korean newspapers printed 20 to 30 times as many articles as the highest quantity in a single US newspaper (10 articles in the *Washington Post*). In addition, the issue provoked intense debate between progressive and conservative media figures in South Korea through editorials and op-eds, while there were no corresponding opinion pieces and almost no controversy in the US media. This significant disparity in attention to and debate over the issue, as with the schoolgirls tragedy, illustrates a definitive role reversal in the asymmetrical alliance.

With growing public dissatisfaction galvanised by media coverage that cast President Lee as emblematic of an inept leadership style which was too attentive to US interests, his administration was plunged into a crisis. While people marched peacefully with lit candles, loudspeakers blared out the songs that South Koreans used to sing during their struggle against the military dictators of the 1970s and 1980s (Choe 2008a). Commentators called the beef protests 'the second Great June Uprising' in reference to the massive pro-democracy protests of 1987 that had overturned an authoritarian government, drawing connections between those events and the rise of overt anti-Americanism. As Straub (2015) recalls: 'the "mad cow" demonstrations of 2008 are another case illustrating the continued existence of popular anti-American feelings in Korea'. The protests peaked in early June, mobilising over 700,000 participants nationwide and placing mounting

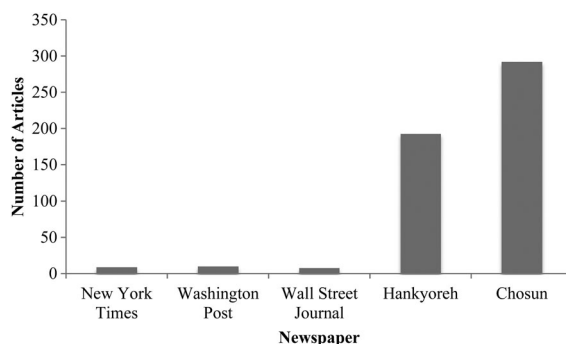


Figure 5. Article counts for the US beef-import protest in South Korea.

Source: LexisNexis Academic (for the New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Washington Post article counts); Korea Integrated News Database System (for Hankyoreh and Chosun Ilbo article counts).

pressures on the government to engage in additional talks with the USA (Lee 2012). To make matters worse, the protests in this instance differed from conventional protests in the past, due to the predominance of women—housewives and teenagers—whom the government could not forcibly suppress (Lee, Kim, and Wainwright 2010).

Lee's record-high popularity plummeted from 80 percent in December 2007 to 17.1 percent in June 2008, the lowest rating of all South Korean presidents (Choe 2008b). This was coupled with online impeachment campaigns on major South Korean Internet portal sites—some with petitions that had been signed by more than a million people. Assurances by US and Korean officials that the planned import conditions were 'consistent with international practice and science' were simply dismissed. Even after a series of press conferences, two presidential apologies to the public, and the replacement of three cabinet ministers and most of Lee's secretaries (including his chief of staff), the candlelight vigils continued as protestors demanded a complete renegotiation of the April deal with the USA (Kim and Cho 2011). As the situation became increasingly volatile, the Korean government suspended its already concluded deal with the USA and dispatched a negotiation team to Washington, calling on the USA to acquiesce in a 'voluntary' arrangement that prohibited beef which was more than 30 months old from being exported to South Korea. Seeking to 'diffuse furor' over the issue in South Korea, the team was able to placate protestors (Weisman 2008) by renegotiating the deal—an act that would have been very difficult without a US concession. In fact, under the pressure of popular protests and increasing anti-Americanism, the USA was compelled to agree to the new deal.

To this day, many Koreans still refuse to eat US beef (in favour of imported beef from other countries such as Australia), and Korean retail outlets must now label beef by its nation of origin. By weight, US beef exports in 2013 were only 43 percent of their 2002 level. On the other hand, the US concession helped contribute to the restoration of a strong alliance relationship under the Lee administration.

Conclusion

This article shows that disparities in attention matter in alliance politics. This is primarily because attention, especially media attention in a democratic country, can influence public opinion in ways that affect alliance dynamics. Since attention is dependent on interest/need, and given that alliance issues are more central to the client state than to the patron state, asymmetry of attention often favours the client state. Accordingly, the client state not only pays more attention to the alliance, but also has the potential to frame and reframe alliance issues to a major degree, reversing the client–patron roles. In other words, extensive and intensive attention within the client state can provoke a public reaction, which, in turn, can increase the client's leverage vis-à-vis its patron.

In the case of the US–ROK alliance, South Korea has more at stake in the relationship, and thus accords much more attention to alliance-related issues. For the USA, South Korea is only part of a larger security system, whereas, for South Korea, the USA is central to its foreign policy agenda and domestic political debates. Accordingly, discussions of the alliance have greater ramifications for South Korea than they do for the USA, and debates concerning the alliance tend to become more intense in South Korea than in the USA. The ROK has in its favour leveraging power resulting from the greater and more intense attention that it pays to the relationship. As Straub (2015, 18)

points out: 'South Korea sets the bilateral agenda and frames issues for the relationship to a major degree, despite the United States being the more "powerful" player'.

More attention, however, does not necessarily mean a better understanding of the issues at stake. In both case studies, whereas the US media 'underplayed' much of the schoolgirls tragedy and beef protests, South Korea was accused of 'exaggerating its risks and opportunities'. In both cases, the South Korean media (*OhMyNews* in 2002 and MBC in 2008) helped bring the incidents to public attention through both 'framing' and 'priming' roles. Rather than reporting only on what was happening, their highly subjective and even prescriptive coverage was a primary factor in provoking public protests. Furthermore, there is a great risk of harm to the alliance when excessive media attention is based on distorted information or is ideologically motivated, as in these cases. Using this asymmetry may sometimes work in favour of advancing particular interests, but taking advantage of it too often may engender harmful consequences for the alliance in the long term (Straub 2015). Nonetheless, these US concessions to collective South Korean demands are good examples of a smaller state wielding influence in alliance politics, and underscore the value of media attention as an explanatory variable.

To be sure, we also need to recognise the importance of the political context in understanding the impact of attention on alliance relations. During the span of about 40 years of authoritarian rule in South Korea, the USA remained a security patron, and instances of US military malfeasance against civilians were common and perhaps even more horrific than the 2002 schoolgirls tragedy. However, military crimes against civilians and any expressions of dissent against the USA during this time period were suppressed by the authoritarian regime. According to Moon's (2004) study of US military sex crimes against South Korean civilians during the authoritarian period, brutal acts by US servicemen provoked no public outrage comparable to the two aforementioned case studies. This, then, begs the question: Had similar acts been documented in the context of a democratised South Korea—one in which the media had already become a central component of South Korean domestic politics—how much more heated would public protests have been? If the accidental deaths of two schoolgirls sparked such widespread public outrage, then surely military sex crimes would have prompted more serious protests in both scale and intensity.

In conclusion, just as the US–ROK alliance can no longer be analysed solely on the basis of power and security, it is important to consider other dimensions to widen the scope of the alliance-politics debate. While many security alignments can be initially accorded the labels of patron and client, as countries develop economically and politically, alliance dynamics are subject to change. In particular, as this study shows, disparities in attention resulting from different interests and needs can significantly affect the dynamics of such alliances. As such, the politics of attention should be included in explanations of relational dynamics among asymmetrical allies. This becomes particularly compelling within developing democracies like South Korea, where the news media, amplified by widespread access to the Internet, retain a key role in domestic and international policymaking.

Notes

1. While Womack focuses on border allies that have a history of antagonistic war, his general theory of asymmetrical misperception and attention makes for an interesting addition to this theoretical framework.

2. For example, Gitlin (1980, 7) describes framing as ‘persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse’.
3. A classic example of priming is when citizens are asked whether they approve or disapprove of the current leader. Those who have seen news stories about national defence will give general evaluations of that leader which are influenced more heavily by their evaluations of the leader’s performance on the defence issue (see, for instance, Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; Zaller 1992).
4. Sanger (2009) asserts that although the media have an agenda-setting capacity, many journalists contend that the government also affects media selection and coverage of key issues.
5. Cha (2004) suggests that while policy coordination was relatively restored, with the ROK agreement to press for the US-formulated complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement approach, the two governments remained suspicious of each other’s intentions.
6. One may argue for reversal of the attention role because the USA often views the North Korea threat as far worse than South Korea. However, the nuclear issue is not really a case of a difference in degree of attention between the two publics, but of different perspectives and perceived national interests. The USA does indeed focus more on the nuclear issue (than it does on other Korea issues) because of its role as the world’s leading nuclear power and because of its mission historically to prevent other countries from becoming nuclear weapons states. In South Korea, conservatives actually hold views similar to those of most Americans about the threat that North Korea poses to the South in general, and about nuclear weapons in particular, while progressives have a different perspective. But both conservative and progressive members of the Korean media and public pay a great deal of attention to the nuclear issue in absolute terms.
7. These figures, among others, are part of a more comprehensive study that examines the differing perceptions on the part of each alliance member. We use coverage in three US dailies (the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*) and two Korean dailies—one conservative (*Choson Ilbo*) and one progressive (*Hankyoreh Shinmoon*)—to reflect the ideological divide in Korean society as discussed here (see Shin 2010).
8. In the current journalistic environment, even high-profile, well-respected journalists may lose their job if a lack of solid research (or other factors) contributes to a perception of bias. This was the case with CBS news anchor Dan Rather, who, during the 2004 presidential election, used memos of questionable credibility to suggest that President George W. Bush had received preferential treatment in the National Guard during the Vietnam War.
9. Our study, at the outset, might seem like we simply picked two unusual events in alliance relations to prove our central arguments. While the two cases are certainly good examples of the attention variable, there are a number of other cases that similarly show the importance of asymmetry of attention. For instance, the Status of Forces Agreement revision negotiations in 2000 are a good example. Here, US officials saw no need for a revision, but eventually agreed amidst a large public outcry surrounding American soldiers’ alleged sexual harassment of a Korean woman. Likewise, the issue of the fighter-jet purchase from the USA is another example. In 2001, Korea was in the process of securing fighter jets, and many in the media reported as if Korea had no choice but to buy US fighters at inflated prices due to the asymmetrical alliance relationship. Ultimately, Korea did purchase the US equipment, but in recent years the Korean government has been diversifying its arms purchases to include purchases from Israel, Russia and Europe (for an excellent discussion of several similarly important events related to the US–ROK alliance, see Straub 2015).
10. *OhMyNews* founder Oh Yeon Ho’s purported logic for starting the citizen online newspaper was his perception that the Korean news media were ideologically imbalanced, with conservative media strains holding an 80 percent advantage in news coverage. His goal was to correct this asymmetrical coverage and bring it to ‘50–50’ (French 2003).
11. Koreans’ widespread use of the Internet in disseminating the news further amplified attention to the incident and fuelled a public outcry. In 2002, a remarkable 57.4 percent of all Korean households had a broadband Internet connection. Several studies note the decisive role of

the Internet in circulating coverage of the schoolgirls tragedy, as well as in providing a forum for building consensus and organising offline protests. As noted above, the online newspaper *OhMyNews*, which drew about 2.7 million page views a day after starting its news service and pioneered ‘citizen journalism’, was particularly instrumental in shaping and precipitating public opinion on the issue (for more information, see Kang 2009; Song 2007).

12. In his personal letter to us on August 5, 2015, David Straub recalls the situation as follows: ‘I assume that very few Americans were advising the President to make an apology and I further assume that they felt that a Presidential apology was not appropriate because (1) making a Presidential apology for a straightforward accident would set a precedent not only in Korea but also in other countries, and (2) it would reinforce in Koreans’ minds (incorrectly in American minds) that the United States as a government had done something to apologize for, when in fact (from an American perspective) the incident was an accident that occurred during U.S. military activities in service to the alliance and Korea and that in the nature of things accidents sometimes will occur. I don’t have documentary proof but it seems virtually certain the President conveyed the apology only because of Korean public and media opinion and his desire to “manage” the alliance relationship. One may also wonder if the U.S. apologized because they felt it had done “something shameful” and was concerned about how it was perceived on the world stage. In fact, Clinton had earlier apologized to Japan for the gang-rape of a Japanese schoolgirl. Unlike the Okinawa case though, the Presidential apology to Koreans over the schoolgirl tragedy occurred with no pressure outside of Korea. Globally, it was widely ignored and seen as nothing more than a mere traffic accident with no reason for an American apology’ (for more on this, see Straub 2015).
13. The Internet also played a significant role in accelerating information transfer and mobilising large-scale protest. This time, with two-thirds of Koreans equipped with mobile phones and near complete Internet penetration, the MBC story was widely and rapidly circulated via cyberspace (see Han 2009).
14. On April 18, 2008, the South Korean government agreed to relax restrictions on beef imports from the USA. On June 21, 2008, the then South Korean president, Lee Myung-bak, offered a formal apology to South Korean citizens after announcing the results of the renegotiation with the USA.

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