

# *The Concept of “China as a Responsible Stakeholder”: Seen from Washington, Beijing and Seoul\**

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## **Abstract**

In 2005, the then U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick proposed the concept of China as a “responsible stakeholder (RS).” There has been considerable discussion and debate over the meaning of the concept and its applicability to China. The germination stage of the concept was marked by an amicable bilateral environment fostered by a sense of expectation by the U.S. toward China, and a corresponding Chinese desire to meet those very expectations. However, such favorable sentiments toward the RS concept waned somewhat due to the adoption of a more realistic viewpoint and differences in interests of both parties. As this contentious debate between the U.S. and China has progressed, other countries have retired to the role of spectators. The fear of being caught up in an undesirable situation by ‘taking sides’ was predominant among the countries peripheral to the issue. In particular, the example of South Korea, which lies close to China’s borders, can be given as evidence of such limited and restrained behavior.

**Key Words:** Responsible stakeholder, Robert Zoellick, China, U.S., South Korea

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## Introduction

In 2005, then U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick decided to take the Beijing government at its word. If China was going to work within the existing international order, then Zoellick proposed that the appropriate framework for evaluating Chinese behavior was that of a "responsible stakeholder": Did China's actions contribute to and strengthen the international institutions it professed to support? Is China genuinely ready in terms of political will and preparation to cooperate as a responsible state (*Zeren Dagu*) with the U.S. on various transnational issues? Will China translate the goodwill gestures displayed by the U.S. into a positive force in formulating a stable international order?<sup>1</sup>

While Zoellick had specific benchmarks in mind, there has been considerable discussion and debate over the meaning of the "responsible stakeholder" concept and its applicability to China. However, the germination stage of the responsible stakeholder concept was marked by an amicable bilateral environment fostered by a sense of expectation by the U.S. toward China, and a corresponding Chinese desire to meet those very expectations. In reality, both nations have undertaken a great deal of cooperation on issues of anti-terrorism, counter-proliferation, climate change, energy, and overcoming the financial crisis. If both states can maintain cooperation as stakeholders in the international system, the current unipolar system with the U.S. at the helm will be marked by the collaborative aspects as opposed to the more conflictual facets of contested leadership.

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<sup>1</sup>- Related discussions can be found at, "Reframing China Policy" - *China as a Responsible Stakeholder*, The Carnegie Debates 2006-2007, June 11, 2007; Melvin Gurtov, "[Editorial] China and the United States: Responsible Stakeholder or Emerging Threat?" *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 2008, pp. 181-83; Ernest J. Wilson III, Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on *China's role in the world: Is China a responsible stakeholder in Africa?* August 3-4, 2006, [www.uscc.gov/...3.../06\\_08\\_3\\_4\\_wilson\\_ernest\\_statement.pdf](http://www.uscc.gov/...3.../06_08_3_4_wilson_ernest_statement.pdf); Chen-yuan Tung, Vice Chairman of the Mainland Affairs Council, ROC, [www.mac.gov.tw/english/.../cn9604.htm](http://www.mac.gov.tw/english/.../cn9604.htm) accessed on September 1, 2009.

Nevertheless, there are still many different opinions regarding Sino-U.S. relations. Initially, the responsible stakeholder concept was introduced by Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick during a period when the U.S. held dual views toward China. This speech came at a time when views of China in the U.S. and Washington were heavily shaped by Pentagon concerns and views of China as a “potential evil force.” Zoellick and the State Department provided an alternate view of the relationship. Moreover, though China was initially encouraged by the U.S. recognition of China as more of a strategic collaborator than a strategic competitor, with time, China entertained suspicions of the U.S. and its strategic intention as perhaps a ploy to have China ‘exhaust’ its powers. Thus, China preferred to cooperate on a selective level so as to not play into the hands of the U.S.

Amid this contentious debate between the U.S. and China, other countries have retired to the role of spectators. The fear of being caught up in an undesirable situation by ‘taking sides’ was predominant among the peripheral countries. In particular, the countries contiguous to China’s borders could not help but think of possible involvement in the polemic as highly problematic.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, South Korea provides a useful case study. Of course, other allies of the U.S. such as Japan, Australia, Singapore, and de facto ally, Taiwan, may present equally worthy case studies. However, Japan as a strong global player is in a state of competition with China, rather than in the position of a fragile third party in U.S.-China discussions. Australia and Singapore, on the other hand, are geographically distant from China, and are not placed in a dilemma by the U.S.-China debate. Taiwan is in the vicinity of China and thus within the direct sphere of Chinese influence, but it is at the same time a part of China and not internationally recognized as a legal political entity. Hence,

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<sup>2</sup>- Christian Caryl, “Beijing and Washington: Rivals in Asia,” *Newsweek*, September 10, 2007.

South Korea as a legitimate entity to the international community within the sphere of the U.S.-China "responsible stakeholder" debate, and as a direct party to the North Korean nuclear problem which is a core issue between the U.S. and China, represents an optimal case.<sup>3</sup> If we accept that the North Korean nuclear issue is included in the conceptual discussion of the responsible stakeholder concept, then it is clear why South Korea is the third-party case-study choice.

Therefore, this paper starts from the responsible stakeholder concept introduced by Robert Zoellick, and discusses the viewpoint of the U.S. and the corresponding reaction from China, zooming in on the example of South Korea as a peripheral country on the sidelines of the debate.

### **Creation and Development of the Responsible Stakeholder Concept in the U.S.**

Zoellick first articulated the idea of the "responsible stakeholder" in 2005. Speaking to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, he argued that "it is time to take our policy beyond opening doors to China's membership in the international system. We need to urge China to become a *responsible stakeholder* in that system. China has a responsibility to strengthen the international system that has enabled its success."<sup>4</sup> Zoellick further explained what this notion entails. "All nations conduct diplomacy to promote their national interests. Responsible stakeholders go further: they recognize that the international system sustains their

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<sup>3</sup>- Thomas Cristensen, "Will China become a 'responsible stakeholder'? - The six-party talks, Taiwan arms sales, and Sino-Japanese relations," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 16, Fall 2005, pp. 2-6.

<sup>4</sup>- Robert Zoellick, "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility," remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, Sept. 21, 2005.

peaceful prosperity, so they work to sustain that system.”<sup>5</sup>

The phrase was soon adopted by other parts of the U.S. government. When President George W. Bush welcomed Chinese President Hu Jintao to the U.S. on April 20, 2006, he used the term for the first time. In the 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review*, the Department of Defense expressed its expectation that China will “emerge as a responsible stakeholder.”<sup>6</sup>

The concept has produced a U.S. policy that seeks to engage China, and helps “to channel China’s growing influence in a positive direction.” Washington wants a cooperative relationship with Beijing, one in which the two countries work together, along with others, to shape the international system and address new challenges. It is worth noting that Zoellick explicitly contrasted U.S. policy toward China with the Cold War containment policy toward the Soviet Union. “For 50 years, our policy was to *fence in* the Soviet Union while its own internal contradictions undermined it. For 30 years, our policy has been to *draw out* the People’s Republic of China.”<sup>7</sup>

The responsible stakeholder concept has two distinct implications. The first concerns the relationship it accords China relative to other states. David Lampton has argued that a “stakeholder” can be likened to a “partner.” Use of the term strongly implies that the U.S. considers China as an important member of the international system which should share an interest in maintaining that system. Lampton explains, “There is no equivalent for stakeholder in Chinese, and in the United States the word carries a strong indication of equal rights and responsibility and equal interests and obligations.”<sup>8</sup>

The clearest manifestation of this policy is the series of bilateral (and

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<sup>5</sup>- Zoellick, “Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility.”

<sup>6</sup>- U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review* Report, February 2006, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup>- Zoellick, “Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility,” emphasis in original.

<sup>8</sup>- *People’s Daily Online*, “New vocabulary ushers China-U.S. relations into global scenarios,” <http://english.people.com.cn>, Dec. 22, 2005.

multilateral) dialogues with which the U.S. engages China. This is a long list, but the most prominent is the Strategic Economic Dialogue, now headed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and their counterparts State Councilor Dai Bingguo and Chinese Vice Premier Wang Qishan. Initially kicked off under former U.S. President George W. Bush, the dialogue proceeds along the two tracks of economics and strategy, involving such issues as the economy, trade, and currency, and further expanding into more diverse areas such as the environment, climate change, terrorism, and traditional security. Others include the NDRC-State Department Dialogue, the Global Issues Forum, the U.S.-China Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade, the Joint Economic Committee, the Five-Party Ministerial Meeting on Energy, and the Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Development.

The second key element of this concept is the standard it sets for Beijing. The "responsible stakeholder" idea has been described as "a broad set of expectations," a "framework," or a "roadmap." Central to this notion are behavioral benchmarks that the U.S. will use to ascertain whether Beijing is in fact being "responsible." In his 2005 speech, Zoellick identified several specific issues that Washington was keeping tabs on: in the economic arena, he pointed to the fairness of competition within the Chinese market, piracy, intellectual property, and currency manipulation; in foreign policy, he warned against the pursuit of a mercantilist energy policy, called for assistance in combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and help fighting terrorism, and inveighed against supporting regimes that violate the human rights of their citizens or back terrorist groups.

The jury is still out on whether China has risen to the challenge. In an authoritative assessment, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Thomas Christensen told Congress that "China increasingly recognizes [its interest in supporting and strengthening the

international system] and we are making progress in many areas of mutual concern.”<sup>9</sup> His report examined China’s relations with problem states – North Korea, Iran, Burma, and Sudan – and other foreign policy challenges – Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon – before tackling issues like global health, energy security, human rights and religious freedom, trade/economic imbalances, nonproliferation and the military.

Bates Gill, a long-time China watcher, agrees with Christensen, concluding that “the trend is clear that China is becoming a more responsible stakeholder. Beijing is taking actions at a global and regional level which by and large are more convergent with U.S. interests, regional expectations and international institutions while making contributions to regional and global security, stability and prosperity and more openly seeking cooperation in the delivery of international public goods.”<sup>10</sup>

Dan Blumenthal, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, takes a different view (one that is, no doubt, shared by many China hawks). He argues, “It is difficult to count China as a responsible stakeholder. While it has taken low-cost actions to help solve some of the challenges to the system, it has done so, for the most part, to alleviate U.S. pressure. It still refuses, however, to take high-cost or risky actions to sustain the international system. When it comes to tradeoffs between narrow interests such as oil, or thwarting threats to the system, it has chosen the former. Moreover, in some instances, China’s approach has taken on the cast of a spoiler, perhaps even a balancer, to America’s vision of international order.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>- Thomas J. Christensen, “China’s Role in the World: Is China a Responsible Stakeholder?” remarks before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Aug. 3, 2006.

<sup>10</sup>- Bates Gill, “China becoming a responsible stakeholder,” in *Reframing China Policy Debate 7: The Carnegie Debates*, June 11, 2007, [http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/Bates\\_paper.pdf](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/Bates_paper.pdf).

<sup>11</sup>- Dan Blumenthal, “Is China at Present (or Will China Become) a Responsible Stakeholder in the International Community,” in *Reframing China Policy: The Carnegie Debates*,

It should be clear that the responsible stakeholder approach is intended to repudiate the “China threat” school and sees China as an opportunity. Chinese rhetoric acknowledges the revisionist record of rising powers, but the Chinese claim that they will not make the same mistakes and they accept prevailing international norms. But it is also important to recognize that the choices are not binary – threat or opportunity – and proponents of the responsible stakeholder policy are not blind-eyed optimists.<sup>12</sup> Zoellick acknowledged that “Uncertainties about how China will use its power will lead the United States – and others as well – to hedge relations with China. Many countries hope China will pursue a ‘Peaceful Rise’ but none will bet their future on it.”

Assistant Secretary Christensen was blunter: “The crux of U.S. policy toward China today [is] a policy that combines active engagement to maximize areas of common interest and cooperation, along with a recognition that we need to maintain strong U.S. regional capabilities in case China does not eventually move down a path consistent with our interests....”<sup>13</sup> As Michael Green, former National Security Council senior Asia director, has explained, “our policy is not a choice of alternative paths, but rather a toolkit that helps us to shape a positive role for Beijing while hedging against the possibility that China’s leaders will instead pursue a negative path.”<sup>14</sup>

To summarize, as evidenced by the emergence of such neologisms as the G2, China’s role in the world has become a clear necessity, and the U.S. has advanced its bilateral relationship with China beyond mere

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[http://www.aei.org/docLib/20070919\\_200705CarnegieDebate.pdf](http://www.aei.org/docLib/20070919_200705CarnegieDebate.pdf).

<sup>12</sup>- Joshua Eiseman and Devin T. Stewart, “Can ‘responsible stakeholder’ hold?” Policy Innovations, Carnegie Council, December 12, 2007, [http://www.policyinnovations.org/ideas/commentary/data/000027/pf\\_printable](http://www.policyinnovations.org/ideas/commentary/data/000027/pf_printable).

<sup>13</sup>- Christensen, “China’s Role in the World: Is China a Responsible Stakeholder?”

<sup>14</sup>- Michael Green, *Constructing a Successful China Strategy - Promote Balance and Democratic Ideals in Asia*, Opportunity 8: Independent Ideas for Our Next President, [www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/.../PB\\_China\\_Green.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/.../PB_China_Green.pdf).

economic concerns, recognizing China as a party to cooperate with on global issues. However, as outlined by the “responsible stakeholder” theory, popular perceptions, and the internal debate within the U.S., there is a question of responsibility toward key global issues behind the discussions on cooperation. This has been linked to talks on global and regional leadership and subsequently placed at the forefront of the debate.

### Chinese Discussions and Responses

China’s initial response to the Zoellick speech was positive.<sup>15</sup> Despite some confusion over the precise meaning of the phrase – reportedly attributable to the absence of a direct translation – there was enthusiasm for an attempt to create a new framework for U.S.-China cooperation. Plainly, a U.S. strategy that seeks bilateral cooperation with China is preferable to one that sees Beijing as a competitor or a threat.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, many Chinese analysts and policy makers recognize that the responsible stakeholder concept ultimately affirms China’s international roles, capabilities and status.

Chinese analysts understand that their country’s rise requires a new foreign policy framework. A country with China’s status and influence has to conceptualize its interests more broadly; narrowly defined self-interest is unbecoming a world power. The result has been a new foreign policy that stresses a harmonious world. While this serves as an international corollary to the theory of harmonious development, it is also an attempt to develop a context for evaluating China’s international behavior.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>- Yang Tiehu, “Military observer,” *Renmin Ribao*, February 12, 2006, [www.people.com.cn](http://www.people.com.cn).

<sup>16</sup>- Liu Aming, “U.S. Response to China’s Rise,” *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations] (in Chinese), 2006 (10), pp. 22-27.

<sup>17</sup>- Yuan Peng, “The Harmonious World and China’s New Diplomacy,” *Xiandai Guoji*

The Chinese acknowledge that they can be held to international standards. A Foreign Ministry spokesperson explained that:

“China is a responsible member of the international community. We have always participated in the international and regional political, economic and security system in light of the UN Charter and fundamental norms governing international relations. In the process, we are enjoying our due rights and making earnest efforts to fulfill our international commitment and obligations. We stand ready to work with all nations including the U.S. to strengthen understanding and dialogue, enhance mutual trust and take an active and constructive part in promoting joint prosperity of mankind on the basis of equality and mutual benefit.”<sup>18</sup>

Wang Guangya, China’s permanent ambassador to the United Nations, highlights his country’s membership in over 100 intergovernmental organizations and signature on over 300 treaties, concluding that China “is naturally glad to be a stakeholder” in the international system.<sup>19</sup>

For many Chinese, the responsible stakeholder concept sells the bilateral relationship short. In remarks at the White House luncheon during his April 2006 visit, President Hu noted that his country and the U.S. are not just “stakeholders” but should be constructive partners.<sup>20</sup> Ever since, virtually every comment on the China-U.S. relationship by Chinese officials, from Hu on down, has used precisely that phrase. Clearly, for most Chinese, the stakeholder concept sets the bar too low for the bilateral relationship.

Still, there is recognition that the responsible stakeholder concept is

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*Guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations] (in Chinese), 2007 (4), pp. 1-8.

<sup>18</sup>- “Foreign Ministry Spokesman Kong Quan’s Regular Press Conference on May 24, 2006,” [www.fmprc.gov.cn](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn).

<sup>19</sup>- Wang Guangya, Summary of Remarks by Ambassador China and the Future of the World, April 28-29, 2006.

<sup>20</sup>- *People’s Daily Online*, “Remarks by President Hu Jintao of The People’s Republic of China at Welcoming Luncheon at the White House Hosted by President George W. Bush of the United States of America,” April 20, 2006.

a potentially double-edged sword. It is not enough to merely be a stakeholder; active contributions are required.<sup>21</sup> Some scholars are concerned that the demands on China may exceed its capacity to respond. If so, China will have to decide whether it will acknowledge those responsibilities. Policy makers must weigh the potential costs and benefits of failing to act or failing to take sufficient action. In either case, China's international status could be damaged.<sup>22</sup>

Other scholars and researchers worry that attempts to take responsibility may require the sacrifice of some Chinese national interests, in particular, the cherished norm of nonintervention in the domestic affairs of states.<sup>23</sup> These scholars maintain that acting as a responsible stakeholder must be done in a manner suitable to China's status and dignity. Thus, responsible behavior is evidenced by offering support and aid to developing nations through the UN.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, this must be done in accordance with Hu Jintao's diplomatic policy for "a harmonious world." Nonetheless, they concede that China has a long way to go before it can call itself a responsible nation.<sup>25</sup>

Some argue that the U.S. call to become a responsible stakeholder was intended to create difficult choices for China. There is apprehension that the concept is designed to highlight Chinese shortcomings, both in

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<sup>21</sup>- Pang Zhongying, "China's Role and Status in the International System," *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations] (in Chinese), 2006 (4), pp. 17-22.

<sup>22</sup>- Liu Zhiyuan, Deputy Director of Division I of the World Military Research Department at the Chinese PLA Academy of Military Science, "Positive signs from Sino-U.S. military exchanges," *People's Daily Online*, June 27, 2007, pp. 22-26.

<sup>23</sup>- The authors would like to thank one anonymous reviewer who points out that while the norm of non-intervention is a cherished part of PRC foreign policy, Beijing undercuts this norm when it suits its national interest: i.e. Kiribatsu, past support for Chadian rebels, etc.

<sup>24</sup>- Zhiyuan, "Positive signs from Sino-U.S. military exchanges."

<sup>25</sup>- Xing Yue and Zhan Yijia, "A Constructivism Analysis on China's Current Diplomacy: New Status, New Interests, New Vision," *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations] (in Chinese), 2006 (11), p. 22.

actions and capabilities.<sup>26</sup> For this group, the responsible stakeholder idea is not a new framework for the bilateral relationship, but is merely a new way to confront China.<sup>27</sup> These critics point out that the U.S. also "propagates various versions of the China threat theory, which is not conducive to stable bilateral relations."<sup>28</sup> Ma Zhengang, president of the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), part of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), argues the responsible stakeholder idea carries the same concerns as those outlined in the China threat theory. The concept only increases and strengthens the formalities of cooperation. It may seem that the U.S. looks at China in a positive light, but, Ma insists, the U.S. is actually maintaining its boundaries and creating a net around China. Thus, he argues that China must be cognizant of its limits as it assesses its capacity to act as a responsible nation.<sup>29</sup>

For most analysts, however, the responsible stakeholder concept is a marked improvement over the China threat school. But it is also clear that there needs to be a better understanding of what is meant by "responsible." Who defines whether actions are consistent with international norms and obligations? Are those responsibilities consistent with national capabilities? There is a fear that the U.S. will arrogate those decisions and definitions to itself. China hopes to become a responsible stakeholder and make its contributions to the world, but it does not want to become a responsible stakeholder solely to serve the "interests of the U.S."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>- Yang Wenchang, President of the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, "Time to correct those Western misconceptions," *People's Daily Online*, July 9, 2007.

<sup>27</sup>- Liu Aming, "U.S. Response to China's Rise," p. 27.

<sup>28</sup>- Liu Zhiyuan, "Positive signs from Sino-U.S. military exchanges."

<sup>29</sup>- Ma Zhengang, "Facing Up to New International Challenges and Promoting Peace and Development," *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu* [Journal of International Studies] (in Chinese), 2007 (3), p. 3.

<sup>30</sup>- Liu Naiqiang, "The right of speaking for China itself," August 20, 2007, *People's Daily Online*, [www.people.com.cn](http://www.people.com.cn), accessed on September 28, 2007.

## South Korea's Distancing and Detachment

South Korea has remained quiet as the U.S. and China have debated the meaning and implications of the responsible stakeholder concept. For the most part, South Koreans view the idea as a sub-theme of the more general discussion of China's rise. South Korea's China scholars analyze the notion through the prism of the Chinese debate. This reflects a growing concern in South Korea with Chinese thinking, at least relative to U.S.-ROK relations.

Few analysts have taken up the "responsible stakeholder" theme since it was articulated by Deputy Secretary Zoellick in 2005. Though research has been conducted to enhance understanding of the responsible stakeholder concept on a functional level as a way of elevating U.S.-China relations,<sup>31</sup> there has been little theoretical interest in whether or not China is a responsible stakeholder or the possibility of China becoming a responsible stakeholder. Instead, South Koreans have shown interest in China's rapid rise and have paid more attention to its economic impact and the security implications for the Korean Peninsula.<sup>32</sup>

Originally, there was widespread belief that China's rise was a historical inevitability. More recently, however, it has been suggested that China's growing prominence is more the result of waning U.S. power than China's own actions. For this group, the U.S.'s "unilateral moment" has passed, and it is becoming a "normal" superpower. Meanwhile, China is resuming its historical status as a regional power (although global power status is on the horizon as well). Thus, their analysis focuses on the

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<sup>31</sup>- Cha Chang Hoon, "Strategic competitor or stakeholder? - Reviewing U.S.-China military exchange," *The Korean Journal of International Affairs* (in Korean), 46 (2), 2006, pp. 81-103.

<sup>32</sup>- Lee Keun, Chap. 12, "The Rise of China and Korea's China Policy," *The Rise of China and Changing East Asian Order* (Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2004), pp. 195-203; Shin Kak-Soo, "The Implications of the Rise of China for South Korean Foreign Policy," *Korea and World Affairs*, 31 (1) (Spring 2007), pp. 13-38.

factors behind this process and tries to understand how to respond to it. The general conclusion is that no country can block this rise, although "restraining" Chinese influence may be an option.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, the focus of South Korean analysis is on China's future role within the international community and when (or if) the U.S. and China may reverse roles in the regional order. As a result, South Korea focuses on regional dynamics and pays considerable attention to changes in the balance of power. There are doubts as to whether China will reach its own national development targets for 2050. The majority view is that it is unlikely to surpass the U.S. by 2020; however, it will still be a regional power.<sup>34</sup> Without global superpower status, China is unlikely to be able to shape international norms to reflect its particular ideas and preferences. As a result, it will continue to be a norm follower, rather than a norm maker.

South Koreans are aware of the disagreement between the U.S. and China over what a responsible stakeholder is and their differing definitions of "responsibility."<sup>35</sup> For the most part, South Koreans accept the benign interpretation of U.S. policy. They see engagement dominating U.S. thinking about China and view U.S. policies toward China as encouraging Beijing's constructive participation in the international order.<sup>36</sup> From this perspective, Washington is trying to constrain China as a stakeholder rather than trying to encircle it.

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<sup>33</sup>- Jaeho Hwang, "China's Future Rise and South Korea's Security Implications," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, 21 (2), 2007, pp. 108-110.

<sup>34</sup>- For related research, see Tae-Hwan Lee (ed.), *Korea's National Strategy 2020 - Northeast Asian Security Cooperation*, Sejong Policy Paper 2005-7 (in Korean), Sejong Research Institute, 2005; KIDA (ed.), *Projection of the Future in 2025* (Seoul: Kim & Jung), 2005.

<sup>35</sup>- Sukhee Han, "The Rise of China and the Responsible Great Power: Comparative Approaches to Perceptual Differences between the West and China," *The Korean Journal of International Affairs* (in Korean), 44 (1), 2004, pp. 191-210.

<sup>36</sup>- Byong-kwon Sohn, "The U.S.'s Response to the Rise of China," *The Korean Journal of Area Studies* (in Korean), 25 (1), 2007, pp. 127-149.

A less benign interpretation is that the U.S. is using China to lessen its own burdens. A few analysts see the responsible stakeholder concept as an attempt to drain Chinese power in the pursuit of international, rather than national, goals.<sup>37</sup> South Koreans have an image – the “water ghost” – that is often used to explain burden sharing in a negative way. This image is suggestive of being “dragged into the water to drown together.” This is how South Koreans see U.S. strategy. By questioning whether China is a responsible stakeholder, the U.S. is attempting to link U.S. and Chinese interests together. The call to support a global standard binds the two countries in a way that furthers both their interests while advancing global concerns.

As demonstrated in the previous discussion, the list of U.S. concerns is long. They range from internal problems, such as human rights issues, to foreign policy concerns such as product safety, unfair trading practices, and trouble spots such as Sudan-Darfur, Myanmar, and Iran, to name just a few exemplars. From a South Korean perspective, these affairs are not urgent, nor do they require immediate action.

Rather, for South Koreans, the most pressing concern – and the filter through which Chinese actions are evaluated – is how China as a responsible stakeholder deals with Korean Peninsula issues.<sup>38</sup> In this light, China has stepped up since the first nuclear crisis in 1994. South Koreans (and many others) expect China to continue to play the role of mediator in the Six-Party Talks, and to continue to push for a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula as well as the creation of a permanent security architecture for Northeast Asia. These efforts reinforce the image of China as a responsible stakeholder working toward con-

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<sup>37</sup>- “Interview with Prof. Chung Jae Ho,” *Peace Network*, <http://peacekoreanet.cafe24.com/zbxe/223202006.03.03>.

<sup>38</sup>- Hongseo Park, “An emerging Sino-U.S. concert system after the Cold War?” China-U.S. cooperation over North Korea’s nuclear diplomacy, *The Korean Journal of International Affairs* (in Korean), 47 (3), 2007, pp. 77-97.

structive solutions in regional diplomacy. For the most part, South Koreans have not extended the responsible stakeholder concept to evaluate Chinese behavior in other areas. Indeed, the two countries have agreed to not address these concerns directly. Neither wants to tackle contentious issues head on and each prefers to deal with them discretely.

There is another fear in South Korea when the responsible stakeholder concept arises: the concern that South Korea will have to take sides between the U.S. and China if it joins the discussion. In fact, with the change of government in the ROK to the Grand National Party (GNP), Lee Myung-bak's firmer approach to the DPRK and stronger focus on relations with Washington and Tokyo suggests that ROK foreign policy is quite different under this new government as compared with the previous Roh Moo-hyun administration. In other words, the Lee government is more receptive of the responsible stakeholder concept and the set of tests the U.S. has set for China under this concept.

Nevertheless, it is difficult not to be conscious of neighboring China amidst an enduring steadfast ROK-U.S. alliance against the larger picture of a rapidly rising China and a relatively declining U.S.<sup>39</sup> Seoul fears a backlash from China if or when it does rise. South Korea is already engaged in a delicate balancing act between Washington and Beijing, and fears its current position would be undermined by weighing in.<sup>40</sup>

Ambiguity on South Korea's part would damage U.S. trust in its ally and be disadvantageous to the U.S.-ROK alliance relative to the U.S. alliance with Japan. There is a belief that the restructuring of the U.S.-

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<sup>39</sup>- Jaeho Hwang, "A Korean perspective on the future of ROK-U.S. relations," *PacNet Newsletter*, No. 54A, August 13, 2009, [www.pacforum.org](http://www.pacforum.org).

<sup>40</sup>- Jae Ho Chung, "From a 'Special Relationship' to Normal Partnership?: Interpreting the 'Garlic Battle' in Sino-South Korean Relations," *Pacific Affairs*, 76 (4) (Winter 2003-2004), pp. 549-568; Chang-hoon Cha, "Sino-U.S. relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and South Korea's strategic choice," *Research for International Affairs* (in Korean), 4 (2), 2004, pp. 113-118.

ROK alliance in recent years has been driven as much by anger in Washington at ROK policies as a need to modernize the alliance.<sup>41</sup> While some analysts in the U.S. understand and sympathize with South Korea's position, it is unclear how widespread that thinking is within the U.S. government. There is speculation that the Lee Myung-bak presidency will strengthen U.S.-ROK relations and will facilitate trilateral cooperation among the U.S., South Korea, and Japan. As Seoul moves closer to Washington, tension should drain from the bilateral relationship. South Korea's dilemma – the product of geography and alliance politics – will not change however. The Lee administration may have taken office expecting to align itself more closely with U.S. positions on human rights and North Korea's nuclear problem, but if North Korea threatens to destabilize the region, Seoul is likely to return its focus to Beijing.

Above all, President Lee is committed to creative pragmatism. Through two state visits to Beijing in 2008, he showed that he will not neglect China even as his administration changes course from that of its predecessor. Moreover, Lee has expressed hopes of elevating bilateral relations between the ROK and China, which ties in with his agenda for a pragmatic economic policy. China's aspiration for continued economic development is well aligned with Lee's desire to prioritize the economy above all other issues.

Thus far, however, South Korea has envisioned itself as a state with a limited horizon. Its concerns have been restricted to the Korean Peninsula. That situation is changing. South Korean interests are increasingly far flung, and its economic and business concerns – and even its political focus – are taking on a global perspective. The successful campaign to have former Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon named the new United

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<sup>41</sup> Dae-Sung Song, "Transformation of U.S. Forces in Korea and Korean National Security: Response Policy and Complementation," *Sejong Policy Studies*, 3 (2), 2007 (in Korean), pp. 27-34.

Nations secretary general is sign of South Korea's new desire to be seen as a global player. Despite some reluctance on the part of South Koreans, Seoul did send peacekeeping forces to Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Gulf of Aden.<sup>42</sup> This may have served as a springboard for South Korea to realize the need to play a bigger role in the international community.

Early signs suggest as much. Although details have not been revealed, the Lee government's Asia policy seems intent on strengthening ties with the U.S., Japan, China, and Russia – thereby making a greater Korean imprint on East Asia – but also involves making a mark on international society. Lee is conducting a foreign policy that contributes to global peace, one that befits a country among the top 12 economic powers of the world, and one that South Koreans can be proud of.<sup>43</sup> South Korea may contribute to a global agenda that includes such issues as democracy and nation-building, human rights, poverty, and conflict resolution. In the future, this new mentality could produce a shift in South Korean thinking about China as well and influence South Korean thinking about the responsible stakeholder concept.

In the mid- to long-term, South Korea hopes that China will become a responsible stakeholder. If China does so, it will not be a threat to South Korea in terms of political, economic, or security concerns. Additionally, South Korea hopes that China, as a great nation, will set a grand example in terms of the global agenda. However, South Korea's immediate concern is the North Korean nuclear problem, and therefore, it does not have the

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<sup>42</sup>- Currently, ROK forces have been deployed to a total of 13 different regions with a tally of 710 personnel under mission, including 359 ROK forces as part of peacekeeping forces in Lebanon and 298 on the Cheong-hae destroyer in the Gulf of Aden in Somali waters. ROK Ministry of National Defense, "ROK Forces in the World," <http://www.mnd.mil.kr/> accessed on August 24, 2009.

<sup>43</sup>- Woo-sang Kim, "The Initialization of a New Asia Foreign Policy," *Newsweek* [Korean Edition], January 2-9, 2008 (in Korean), pp. 24-25.

flexibility to monitor China's overall role as a responsible stakeholder in the international community.

## Conclusion

The responsible stakeholder concept provides a positive first step for a new conceptual framework for U.S.-China relations. Unfortunately, the meaning and content of this new framework are disputed. Moreover, the resources each country can bring to bear in dealing with problems and the investments they are prepared to make within the framework differ significantly, both in terms of amounts and expectations. Clearly, it will still be some time before the responsible stakeholder concept comes to define the U.S.-China relationship.<sup>44</sup>

Americans see this idea as a means to develop a constructive and cooperative bilateral relationship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The new Obama administration that came to office on January 24, 2009 emphasized cooperation with other states in place of unilateralism, especially acknowledging China as a player that cannot be left out when it comes to America's international strategy.<sup>45</sup> This concept has continued to dominate policy during Obama's administration. At the same time, Obama's administration calls for China to increase its stake in the international community, thereby adhering to international norms and taking on greater responsibility. Observers should pay close attention to the formulation of new policies toward China as well as the perceptions and terminologies associated with it.

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<sup>44</sup>- Wang Jianwei, "Can 'stakeholder' hold U.S.-China relations?" *PacNet* #17A, May 11, 2006.

<sup>45</sup>- Secretary Clinton's March Asia visit confirmed that the focus of America's Asian diplomacy will be China. There will be a great deal of cooperation between the two countries on antiterrorism, counter-proliferation, climate change, energy, and overcoming the financial crisis.

China's international standing greatly increased with the August 2008 Olympics, and in the second half of 2008, during the financial crisis, China's existence was definitely felt. China probably wants to take ownership and act as a responsible stakeholder as Obama suggests. However the Chinese see this as a device to foist American demands upon them. This has neither helped to reduce suspicions about long-term relations nor provided a better foundation for that relationship.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, this is a temporary sentiment and the debate surrounding this point has decreased somewhat. Instead, there is a need to focus on whether U.S. popular perceptions toward China will maintain the responsible stakeholder concept as a core idea or take on a completely new viewpoint.

With implications not only for China and the U.S., but also the adjacent region as a whole, the advent of this concept and the subsequent debates have shaped the actions of the affected states in a rather passive manner. The example of South Korea can be given as evidence of such limited and restrained behavior. South Korea is merely observing the debate over the responsible stakeholder concept; most South Koreans feel this is an issue between the U.S. and China. Still, South Korean analysts are troubled by the prospect of balancing relations with both the U.S. and China. The bilateral relationship will continue to oscillate between cooperation and competition (sometimes the two will happen at the same time). South Korea anticipates that both nations will maintain and apply the responsible stakeholder concept when dealing with the North Korean nuclear problem and when addressing Korean reunification. Aside from these problems, there are no other issues to which South Korea can apply the responsible stakeholder concept as a benchmark.

Ultimately, the responsible stakeholder concept seems best suited to global issues. South Korean concerns have been largely peninsular,

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<sup>46</sup>- Wang, "Can 'stakeholder' hold U.S.-China relations?"

although they appear to be spreading to encompass a more regional outlook. This broader conceptualization of national interests may provide a context within which to analyze and assess Chinese behavior. By framing Chinese actions more widely, Seoul can avoid a zero-sum formulation that obliges it to align with either the U.S. or China. A global perspective allows Seoul to embrace national interests and permits it to evaluate Chinese behavior from a system-wide perspective. That reformulation of South Korean interests is only beginning, however. Today, South Korea is still focused on expanding its national interests. This defines Seoul's position more generally, and serves as the pivot for South Korean security policy.

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