

Roh's Election Victory and the Widening Gap Between the U.S. and South Korea

By Tim Shorrock

The December election of human rights activist Roh Moo-hyun as South Korea's next president has turned into a giant wake-up call for U.S. policymakers and foreign affairs specialists. At the same time, is it sowing the seeds for a national debate about U.S.-Korean relations that offers a unique opportunity for U.S. progressives and peace activists.

On December 19, Roh won a narrow victory over his conservative challenger, Lee Hoi-chang, despite a last-minute controversy over his remarks that South Korea should mediate, rather than participate in, a future conflict between North Korea and the United States, and a forceful warning to North Korea from U.S. and Japanese defense officials on the eve of the election that Pyongyang's use of weapons of mass destruction "would have the gravest consequences."

Not long ago, those incidents would have doomed Roh's candidacy and driven South Korean voters into the welcoming arms of Lee and his supporters, who have sided with the administration of President George W. Bush in taking a tough stand toward North Korea's nascent nuclear-weapons program and flatly rejected President Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy" of engagement with Pyongyang. Roh was the candidate of Kim's ruling Millennium Democratic Party, while Lee ran on the ticket of the opposition Grand National Party.

But times have changed. As the United States and South Korea greet 2003, a year that will mark the 50th anniversary of the end of the Korean War, they are farther apart on issues of security and U.S. forces in Korea than any other time since U.S. troops first entered the country in 1945.

Those differences have been aggravated over the past few weeks in the wake of North Korea's confession last October that it had started a uranium enrichment program, its decision in December to restart a small reactor at Yongbyon that could produce enough plutonium for five or six atomic weapons within a year, and its expulsion at year's end of UN weapons inspectors who have been monitoring Yongbyon since 1994, the year North Korea signed a nonproliferation pact with Washington known as the Agreed Framework.

In the eyes of many South Koreans, responsibility for the standoff lies directly with the Bush administration. Many Koreans believe that Bush administration needlessly aggravated tensions by ridiculing Kim's Sunshine Policy in 2001, labeling the North as part of an "axis of evil" and, more recently, refusing to engage in dialogue with Pyongyang over missile exports, a non-aggression treaty, and its attempts to restart its nuclear weapons program. Bush's comments to *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward that he "loathes" North Korean president Kim Jong Il and doesn't understand arguments against "toppling" Kim's government have added to those fears. Underlying the anger is a conviction held by many South Koreans that U.S. forces are deployed in Korea not to defend the South but to project U.S. power in Asia and elsewhere around the world.

Another sign of the deterioration in relations is the rising anger over the recent acquittal by a U.S. military tribunal of two U.S. soldiers whose armored vehicle accidentally killed two Korean schoolgirls last June. In recent months, hundreds of thousands of people have held candlelight vigils in Seoul, Kwangju, and other cities demanding revisions to the Status of

Forces Agreement that prohibits South Korean courts from trying U.S. soldiers accused of crimes against Korean civilians. Significantly, both Roh and Lee called for a revision of that agreement, as has President Kim. But the Bush administration has refused, saying at a U.S.-Korean defense consultation in December that any proposed changes wouldn't have prevented the accident that cost the two young girls their lives.

As the nuclear standoff has deepened, South Koreans have gone out of their way to tell foreign reporters that they view America as more dangerous to Korea's future than the starvation-ridden police state just a few miles north of their dynamic, internet-savvy democracy. "Bush is a trigger-happy man," a 32-year-old voter in Seoul told the Associated Press on election day. "We need a leader who can say no when we think we should say no. Our country has been too subservient to the United States." Some even defend North Korea's attempts to build nuclear weapons, arguing that Pyongyang has no choice in the face of U.S. hostility, and that a Korean bomb could serve to deter any enemies of a future, united Korea. Many of the Koreans protesting the verdicts on the two U.S. soldiers say they want their government to reconsider the presence of the 37,000 U.S. troops in the country.

The distance between U.S. and South Korean perceptions extends to basic issues of foreign policy. According to a recent poll on global attitudes toward the United States conducted by the Pew Research Center, South Korea stands out in Asia "for its opposition to the war on terrorism and its belief that the United States pays little attention to Seoul's concerns." The poll found that 72% of Koreans oppose the U.S.-led war on

terrorism, with only 24% in support of it; in Japan, those figures were almost reversed, with 32% opposed to the war and 61% in favor. Of all the Asian countries polled, South Koreans also had the highest number of people, 73%, who reject the view that U.S. foreign policy considers the interests of other countries.

During the campaign, Roh took up the banner of Koreans who want changes in the relationship with the United States, while Lee firmly held to the view that South Korea and the United States should be closely aligned. Echoing the views of many Bush administration officials and U.S. commentators, Lee called Kim's Sunshine Policy a "failed policy of appeasement" and said he would halt economic exchanges until the nuclear issue was resolved. "We should not entrust the nation to unstable, premature, and radical forces," Lee said, using language that echoed charges leveled by establishment figures against Kim when he ran for president in the 1980s.

Roh, in contrast, said he would continue talking with the North and carry on the economic projects under way. In a comment that was widely publicized in the U.S. press, he declared that "I don't have any anti-American sentiment, but I won't kowtow to the Americans, either." In one debate, Roh noted that the crisis with North Korea in 1993, when the administration of Bill Clinton came close to launching a preemptive attack on the North's nuclear facilities, was almost entirely a U.S. affair. "We almost went to the brink of war in 1993 with North Korea, and at the time we didn't even know it," he said. "We don't want to become spectators again. In the old days, we were not able to solve our problems ourselves. Now it is different. We should say

with confidence what we want and what we demand."

Over the past week, Roh has begun to implement the policies he outlined in the campaign. This month, Kim Dae Jung's national security adviser and Roh's foreign policy aides will present a compromise to the Bush administration that would require North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons program in exchange for written guarantees from Washington that the U.S. will not launch a preemptive attack on North Korea either by conventional or nuclear weapons.

The Bush administration clearly doesn't like being pressured by its ally to negotiate with the North. In the days before the election, defense hawks tried to send a message to South Korean voters that Roh was making a mistake. Richard Perle, the chairman of the Pentagon Defense Policy Board, told the conservative daily *Chosun Ilbo* that the U.S. government has not eliminated the option of using force against North Korea to stop its nuclear program. "The Bush administration will consider all the alternatives, because the dangers involved are so substantial," he said. Perle added that "the dangers to be brought upon us by North Korea's nuclear development is so great that it will result in a quarantine of unprecedented comprehensiveness." That is quite a contrast to Roh's policies of continuing economic exchanges with the North as the dispute is settled through diplomatic means.

But it is clear from comments made over the past few days that Bush and his inner circle have rejected the idea that military action is necessary to force Kim Jong Il to end his nuclear weapons program and that some form of negotiations is in order. For the Pentagon and the more hawkish

elements of the administration, who see the South Koreans—at best—as junior partners, that is a hard pill to swallow. “It’s like teaching a child how to ride a bike,” one Pentagon official told the *New York Times* about U.S. relations with Seoul. A Korea specialist with ties to many members of President Bush’s foreign policy team told the Times that “our first priority is to get Roh and Kim to stop saying that the United States’ approach will not work. If we don’t do that, the divide will get worse.”

In the land of punditry, South Korea’s evolution into a democracy and a more independent player in the U.S. empire has evoked anger and released deep-seated animosity toward the people of the south. Writing on January 6, for example, Robert Novak wrote that “today’s Koreans show little gratitude to Americans for shedding their blood in 1950-53 to prevent (South Korea) from falling under communist control. Indeed, they hardly remember it. Roh Moo-hyun is a reflection of that mood rather than its creator.” Kim Dae Jung, he added, “proved the most anti-American president in the Republic’s history. Roh was the idolizing protégé of Kim, but he has gone well beyond his patron in pulling Uncle Sam’s whiskers.”

On January 7, Doug Bandow, an Asian analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, lambasted South Korean attitudes and declared that “it’s time for an amicable divorce rather than a much more bitter parting in the near future.” In forums in recent weeks, Bandow, whose views are quite influential within U.S. policy circles, has proposed that the United States

should encourage Japan and South Korea to go nuclear in response to the North Korean nuclear threat.

Unfortunately, there have been few voices on the left to counter the conservative hostility to Korea. Aside from a few contributors to the Foreign Policy in Focus think tank and groups like the American Friends Service Committee and the Nautilus Institute in Berkeley, the task of explaining Korea to the public has largely been taken up by mainstream journalists, such as Selig Harrison, and former diplomats, such as Donald Gregg, who once served as U.S. ambassador to South Korea and CIA Station Chief in Seoul. Harrison has been warning for years that the U.S. failure to come through with many of its promises to North Korea in the 1994 Agreed Framework could lead to a new crisis; he has recently published a book, *Korea Endgame*, that outlines a comprehensive path to creating a lasting peace in Korea and eventually withdrawing U.S. troops. Gregg has been an outspoken advocate of engagement with Pyongyang and has visited there several times to defuse tensions. He and former journalist Don Oberdorfer went to North Korea in November and came back saying that Kim’s government was eager for comprehensive talks to resolve the standoff over its uranium enrichment program.

The left, in contrast, has largely abandoned Asia as a focus of political debate. Since Vietnam, East Asia has primarily been of economic interest rather than a political concern. During the 1980s, when South Korea was in the midst of an intense political upheaval, the mainstream left and

the peace movement largely ignored the situation. More recently, North Korea and its hereditary form of socialism has become a favorite target for ridicule and hostility among leftists, who as a result have no basis to analyze North Korea’s intentions or appreciate why its leaders genuinely fear the United States.

For progressives to play a part in the unfolding debate about Korea policy, it is important to go beyond knee-jerk condemnation of Kim Jong Il and the North Korean political system and understand why and how South Koreans hope to eventually unify with the North. Peace in Korea is not some pipedream, but rather a realistic desire to draw North Korea into the global community through trade, investment, and industrial projects that would help the North feed its own people, bring back an industrial economy that as recently as 20 years ago was larger than the South’s, and shift from a military to a civilian economy. The left and the peace movement also need to understand the important role China can play in the process and learn to respect Chinese fears of U.S. domination of Asia. Ending the cold war in Korea requires progressives to jettison their own cold war prejudices and understand the economic and political realities of contemporary Asia.

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