

South Korea Joins the Axis of Independence

By John Feffer | February 24, 2003

Roh Moo Hyun, the incoming South Korean president, is part of a trend that raises the hackles of the Bush administration. America now has another outspoken and uncowed “ally.” Roh joins an axis of independence that includes France’s Jacques Chirac and Germany’s Gerhard Schroeder. With friends like these, the Bush team laments, who needs an axis of evil? What’s bad for Bush, however, is a boon for the rest of the world and particularly for the Korean peninsula. Roh Moo Hyun is the world’s best hope for avoiding war in East Asia.

Roh Moo Hyun is a true outsider, a lawyer who never went to college or law school and passed the fiendishly difficult bar exam through his own efforts. He defended students and labor leaders, the key organizers of Korea’s democratization movement, and went on to serve in the legislature. Considerably younger than outgoing president Kim Dae Jung, Roh is a spokesman for the influential generation that graduated from college in the 1980s and is fed up with the cold war that lingers on the peninsula.

Many Koreans hope that Roh’s independence will enable him to sweep away Korea’s endemic corruption and put economic reform on a more solid foundation. The big corporations have already shown signs of early capitulation by dropping their opposition to class action suits in the financial world—a much-needed step in the direction of greater transparency.

But it is foreign policy where Roh will make his mark. The new president is even more committed than the previous administration to a policy of engaging North Korea. He favors moving forward with North-South reconciliation even before the current nuclear crisis is resolved.

Roh’s inauguration comes at a crucial time. The Bush administration has so far refused to negotiate with Pyongyang and has developed military plans to accomplish the regime change that malign neglect has so far failed to accomplish. Though it still adheres marginally to a peace constitution, Japan has announced that it too would launch a preemptive attack if it thought North Korea were about to strike

first. And North Korea, apparently moving forward with its nuclear program, has made repeated threats of its own, including withdrawal from the 1953 armistice agreement that ended the Korean War.

Trigger fingers are getting itchy in East Asia, and only Roh Moo Hyun clings tenaciously to an olive branch. A U.S. “military strike against North Korea is an extremely serious matter that could lead to a war on the peninsula,” he has said. “So I oppose even a review of such a possibility.” Roh knows that war will bring untold death and destruction to South Korea. And North Korea’s collapse would burden his country with refugees and economic and political challenges that dwarf what West Germany faced over a decade ago.

U.S. war plans have traditionally relied on South Korea to provide military support and to establish political control in the event of a North Korean collapse. As such, Roh’s pacifist tendencies put more than a speed bump between the United States and full-scale war on the Korean peninsula.

But that’s not all. Roh wants Uncle Sam to stop treating his country like an untrustworthy teenager. The Status of Forces Agreement between the two countries (which governs the legal status of U.S. troopsestablishes the conditions for U.S. military presence in South Korea) is woefully lopsided when compared to similar U.S. agreements with other countries, such as Germany. In the recent demonstrations around the accidental killing of two Korean schoolgirls by U.S. soldiers, tens of thousands of



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South Koreans gave vent to years of pent-up frustration and anger.

Neither Roh, nor the majority of the demonstrators in South Korea, are anti-American. They, like anti-war protestors in New York and London, oppose specific American policies. They are part of a worldwide reaction to the unilateralism of the Bush administration. If the current administration continues along its current path, the axis of independence may expand to include all U.S. allies.

Roh is no stranger to uphill battles. He pulled off a stunning upset victory in the December elections. Now, facing even longer odds in the international arena, he is simultaneously trying to establish peace

with North Korea and negotiate a more just relationship with the United States. Kim Dae Jung's Nobel Peace Prize is a tough act to follow. If Roh pulls off these two foreign policy feats, he will set the stage for a more profound prize: a peaceful, unified Korea.

(John Feffer <johnfeffer@aol.com> is the author of Shock Waves: Eastern Europe After the Revolutions, the editor of the forthcoming Power Trip: U.S. Foreign Policy After September 11 (Seven Stories, 2003), and has recently returned from three years based in Tokyo working on East Asian issues. Feffer is also an FPIF advisory committee member (online at www.fpif.org.)

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