

New Dynamics in U.S.–Korean Relations

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The victory of the liberal Roh Moo-Hyun in the December 19th South Korean presidential elections has been presented in the western media as a source of future tension in South Korean-U.S. relations. Roh, a long-time liberal and human rights advocate, when compared to his more conservative opponent, Lee Hoi-Chang, does represent a more challenging partner for future South Korean-U.S. relations. Roh's stated aims include continuing the "Sunshine Policy" of engagement with North Korea, renegotiating the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) for the 37,000 U.S. troops in South Korea, and maintaining a more independent foreign policy in international and regional affairs. However, it is difficult to argue that anything Roh does could place more tension on the South Korea-U.S. relationship than the Bush administration's unilateral foreign policy.

Indeed the current (and immediate future) state of South Korean-U.S. relations is the result of much deeper currents. Anti-Americanism has been on the rise since the end of the cold war due in part to a perception that the absence of a serious global security threat vitiates the need to tolerate U.S. arrogance and unilateralism. In South Korea, the success of the Sunshine Policy has further reduced the perception of threat from across the last cold war frontier in Asia. The situation of reduced threat and U.S. unilateralism has combined in South Korea to create a situation that does not augur well for future South Korean-U.S. relations. Anti-Americanism in South Korea, a once close and

passionate supporter of U.S. policy, has risen to alarming levels.

Anti-Americanism: Then and Now

An American soldier was detained by an angry mob, forced to watch an anti-American demonstration at which he was photographed, videotaped, and forced to make a public statement demanding justice from the United States. He was then taken to another location to apologize to the co-chairman of an anti-American organization...

It is hard not to conjure up images of a poor American GI being bound, blindfolded, and dragged, then driven in a beat-up old Peugeot along dusty narrow roads, all to the background sound of evening prayer echoing along stucco bullet-ridden walls. However this particular event did not occur in Lebanon, Iran, or even the Middle East, but in affluent uptown Seoul in September 2002.

Anti-Americanism was once viewed in South Korea as unpatriotic and radical. The cold war formed the South Korean state. Its very existence was the result of political and strategic decisions in Washington to contain communism in North Asia. Its continued existence was the result of a long bitter war in which approximately 36,000 American soldiers died side by side more than 1 million South Korean casualties. In cold war rhetoric, to be anti-American

was to be radical and pro-Soviet, and hence an enemy of the state.

In the early years of the Republic of Korea anti-Americanism was just that—radical. It was limited to an extremely small number, who risked both arrest and imprisonment under the National Security Law (1948). The National Security Law was used primarily by the Rhee administration to ensure support for his conservative, right-wing power base. Its use also ensured that anti-Americanism remained the domain of only radicals who were willing to risk arrest. Effectively, it meant anti-Americanism remained closely associated with Marxism-Leninism, where it remained until the advent of the democratization movement.

The democratization movement changed South Korean anti-Americanism. It removed anti-Americanism from the confines of Marxism-Leninism and radicalism and placed it in the realms of Korean nationalism and legitimate mainstream political discourse. Further, the post-democracy period has allowed a reinterpretation of Korean history and a re-evaluation of the Korean national identity. The reinterpretation and revaluation changed the understanding of anti-Americanism in the minds of both the elder and younger generation in today's South Korea.

Revelations of American complicity in the continued repression of the democracy movement led to a growing cynicism about America's place in Korean history. The permission granted by General Carter Magruder to the Korean Army to dispatch troops in the Masan Riots (1960) during early democratic struggles and the more controversial decision to release troops from Combined Forces Command to suppress the Kwangju

uprising (1980) highlighted American interference.

Other commentators have gone further to note the earlier historical role of the United States in Korean affairs, including American disregard for the United States-Korea Treaty of 1882 that was understood to protect Korea from imperialist designs, the Taft-Katsura agreement of 1905, which exchanged Japan's agreement to the American annexation of Hawaii for America's agreement to Japan's annexation of Korea. A new understanding of American involvement in Korea emerged. Whereas America had previously been viewed as a strong supporter of democracy guided by Wilsonian values, it is now popularly considered hypocritical, calculating, and self-driven. This is the same reinterpretation of American values and revelation of their hypocrisy that created greater anti-Americanism throughout the third world.

The legitimization and widening of anti-Americanism has also justified its expression in other areas that mirror complaints across the globe. Anti-Americanism in South Korea now openly reflects public responses to perceived threats to economic, cultural, and national identity.

The U.S. Military Presence

The greatest source of tension contributing to anti-Americanism based on national identity is of course the American military presence. The U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) are the subject of an abundance of complaints. These include the involvement in the deaths of two teenage girls during a training exercise, the existence of the Yongsan military base in downtown Seoul, environmental standards on U.S. bases, and the inadequate revi-

sion of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA).

On June 16, 2002, two teenage girls were killed in a road accident in Yangju, north of Seoul involving a USFK tank on the way to training exercises in the area. The tragic accident grew into a major issue centering upon the presence of American forces in South Korea. The extremely emotional nature of the accident galvanized growing anti-American sentiment to such an extent that both governments expressed fears. At the center of the issue was the refusal of USFK to release the two soldiers to be tried under South Korean jurisdiction, after a request by the South Korean Justice Ministry. Under the SOFA the USFK is not required to hand over jurisdiction for incidents that occur during training.

The event has sparked what is considered to be the strongest anti-Americanism in South Korea's history. The inability to buy a Coca-Cola due to shopkeepers' refusal to sell American goods is not even recognized by expatriates turned away by signs on doors brandishing statements such as "We do not serve girl killers—Americans go home." The daily protests outside the American embassy in Seoul and the Yongsan military grew to demonstrations by more than 300,000 people in Seoul and Busan, thousands more in rural and provincial cities, as well as demonstrations by South Korean communities in the U.S., Australia, and Germany.

The SOFA remains at the center of many civic group protests. In particular, the protection afforded to USFK for crimes committed while on duty. The last revision, which occurred in 2001, increased South Korean jurisdiction for crimes committed off-duty, made provisions for the protection of Koreans working on U.S. bases, and

also set out environmental protection provisions to be followed by USFK. Despite the changes, there remains a large movement opposed to the current agreement.

North Korea

The divergent views on North Korea policy between the United States and South Korea has been intensified by the fear that the pre-emptive strike policy may extend to North Korea, particularly in the wake of the nuclear revelation. Inevitably the South Korean public views Washington's recent policy in North Asia from NMD to hard line approaches with North Korea as divergent from their interests.

The division of the world into the two camps of good and evil backed

by a first strike policy has placed South Korean society in the difficult situation of choosing between support for Bush's vision of the world or Kim Dae Jung's vision of a united Korea. The continuing rise in anti-Americanism is the result of this choice. With the election of Roh Moo-Hyun in the December presidential elections the big question now is not whether anti-Americanism will continue, but to what extent will it affect the policy of the new president.

Roh has promised to immediately investigate options for the renegotiation of the SOFA, continue reconciliation with the North, and initiate a new independence in the pursuit of foreign policy. As yet he has not announced his international policy team. Needless to say, with the current nuclear situation in North Korea

and the rising levels of anti-Americanism at home, the new international policy team will have its work cut out when the new president takes office in February.

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