



## **The ROK President of 2013 – 2018: Who Should Lead the Nation at This Critical Time?**

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### **Abstract**

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In December 2012 Korea will elect a new president to lead the nation until the year 2018. What happens in these five years will be critical to the future of Korea. The first step in choosing a new president is to consider the challenges Korea will face in the years ahead. The second step is to consider how prepared a presidential candidate is to meet those challenges. Korean voters will be tempted to vote for a candidate who promises to make their economic lives better, but many of the challenges that Korea faces are bigger than the nation. The next president must be able to see the big picture of international relations, and he or she will also need a long-term policy to transform North Korea into a society and economy that can eventually be merged with Korea. Unfortunately, no one can know exactly what challenges Korea will face in the years ahead, but voters can try to judge who will do the best job of leading them by ignoring promises and instead considering each candidate's character, principles, intelligence, and ability to work and communicate with others.

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## ANALYSIS

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### INTRODUCTION: BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

2012 will be an important year of political transitions in Northeast Asia and in the United States. China, (South) Korea, Russia and America will have new leaders, while North Korea will be promoting the appointment of the third generation of the Kim family to rule the country.

Peaceful and efficient leadership change on the national level is no mean task. Government services must continue uninterrupted and there must be some continuity in policies. And once a new leader has taken office, no matter how good or bad, you are usually stuck with him or her for several years, or in the case of a dictatorship, for decades. In December 2012 Korea will elect a new president who will lead the nation until the year 2018. What happens in these five future years will be critical to the future of the nation, for this will not be a time of business as usual.

The first step in choosing a new leader is to consider the challenges the nation will face. The second step is to consider how well each candidate can meet those challenges. In the coming years, here are some challenges (not in priority order) that I think will call upon the skills of the next Korean president:

- (1) The global financial and economic economy will continue to face serious challenges, and these challenges will have an impact on Korea, although the Korean economy in recent years has demonstrated resilience, creativity, and comparative strength.
- (2) North Korea will not give up its nuclear program and will burden Korea with all sorts of problems and alarms including military provocations.
- (3) China will continue to grow as a major player in the regional and global economies and will enhance its political and military power accordingly; it will also continue to support North Korea.
- (4) America's economic problems, resulting in federal budget cuts, will influence Korea's economy and perhaps its security situation.
- (5) Korean youth and left-wing political citizens will continue to evolve their social networking and social media skills to challenge traditional party politics; this segment of the electorate, ideological and relatively anti-American, pro-North Korean, and nationalistic, will continue to fight against globalization, including the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA).
- (6) Education will continue to be a driving force in the Korean economy, but educational goals will have to be adjusted in order to ensure economic progress and avoid trapping a large segment of the population in a high education-low employment future.
- (7) Conflict within Korean society may threaten to undermine fundamental policies and values such as the rule of law, social accountability, human rights, and the fight against structural corruption. The world continues to move toward open democracy, and those Koreans who support closed, authoritarian systems (such as North Korea's) will hold back Korean progress.



On these important issues I am in no position to offer advice on who should become the next president, but I do want to share a few observations based on years of experience with Koreans and other Asians, visits to many other countries throughout the world, and my citizenship in the United States for the last 30 years.

### **POLITICS IS LOCAL AND FILLED WITH PROMISES**

In a national election, foreign policy and even national security policy considerations go out through the back door and local politics and economic issues triumphantly walk in through the front door. For ordinary citizens, job security, a good economy, and better living conditions are uppermost in their mind when they enter the voting booth. Even when economic times are good, voters' brains are filled with thoughts of daily problems such as college education expenses, energy costs, local environmental issues, and better jobs rather than bigger and more abstract issues such as the global economy, national security, foreign policy, and putting the nation on track for a better future. This is so even though global trends and future-oriented issues are the ultimate drivers of every citizen's economic well-being. In the United States, we remember the election mantra of former President William Clinton: "It's the economy, stupid." and candidate Obama's call for "change we can believe in."

Candidates tend to promise whatever they think will get them elected. Once in office, reality rarely matches the promises they made on the election circuit. Even if they have been successful in past offices, such as mayor or governor, that is no indication that they will be able to do what they promise at the national level, which includes a different mix of players. Looking at the American experience, candidate Obama based his election campaign on the promise of change, but President Obama found that it was extremely difficult to get anything done once he got to the "real world" of Washington.

Korean voters will vote for a candidate who promises to make their economic lives better. However, the issues that will affect their prosperity are complex, ranging from global economic issues to political and military trends in Asia. Korea has crossed the Rubicon in the sense that it has already built a firm economic foundation. To build further on this foundation, Korea must enter a second stage that focuses on becoming a workable civil society that benefits all its members. Pressing issues include

- (1) Providing fulfilling jobs for those who graduate from high schools and colleges;
- (2) Providing opportunities for poor and low-income families so they and their children can participate in Korea's future;
- (3) Providing medical and social benefits for the elderly, unemployed, and orphaned children, who are as much a part of society as the rich and powerful;
- (4) Establishing training and life-time learning centers for the growing contingent of retirees and for the long-term unemployed so they can continue to feel they are a part of society; and
- (5) Providing the kind of education, including special education, that helps all students find a place in society.

We can be sure that party politics and ideological divisions among Koreans will bring the election season to a feverish soon, bombarding voters with emotional appeals and ridiculous promises. Just as consumers cannot



afford to believe all or even most of the advertisements that are targeted at them by businesses, so voters must ignore partisan appeals. There is a particular need during election time to hark back to basic principles and common sense. Because it is difficult to predict what a politician will actually do once he or she is elected, it is important to assess the integrity, open-mindedness and intelligence of candidates, for these qualities will help them face whatever challenges they face. Although it is difficult for Korean voters to see beyond their local environment, I think they should consider the following issues.

### **THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC DOWNTURN AND PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP**

The Korean economic miracle was hard hit by the global financial crisis of 1997. Korea overcame the crisis with national solidarity among citizens and government leaders. Korean companies undertook structural reforms and Korean citizens made news in the global media by donating personal items of gold to rescue the nation, even if these donations had a only symbolic impact. The financial crisis lifted the Korean economy to a new level not just in terms of economic success but in terms of creating a better foundation for future progress. Government-mandated reforms included improving the legal and regulatory systems on which the economy depends, rehabilitating the financial sector, promoting capital account liberalization, and improving corporate governance of financial institutions.<sup>1</sup> These changes may not have been widely understood by most Koreans, but they made the Korean economy better able to withstand future economic dips.

Now, the world is experiencing another economic crisis, potentially worse than the previous one. Korea sailed through the previous downturn by increasing the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to modernize the economy. The ICT portion of Korea's GDP doubled from 1997 (when it was 7.7 %) to 2000, and continued to grow by about 5 % a year, compared to an average growth of only 0.3 % growth in 23 OECD countries.<sup>2</sup> What will bring Korea through the current impending crisis is not easy to say, but the next Korean leader must be a person who can grasp global economic trends and adopt policies that will enable Korea to float in the global marketplace. Candidates who oppose the recently passed Korea-US Free Trade Agreement ORUS-FTA may get the vote of those Koreans who cannot see beyond their local economy, but by avoiding participation in the global economy they will be restricting Korea's economic future.

### **DEALING WITH NORTH KOREA: A TOUGH JOB FOR ANY PRESIDENT**

Since the division of Korea into north and south in 1948, Korea has been bedeviled by a seemingly intractable problem that has loomed over the entire nation. Many people, especially of the younger generation, would prefer to ignore this problem, but it will not go away. The families of more than 11 million Koreans are divided and dispersed. Waves of dissatisfied North Koreans are landing on Korea's shore. No matter what Korea does, the North Korean regime will stick to its guns and continue to oppress its people. The regime will continue to provoke Korea in an attempt to rescue the North Korean economy from certain doom. The regime's "military-first politics" will be used to deter Korea and other countries from interfering with the ruling regime. Although most Koreans (and people throughout the world) have grown used to the policies of the North Korean regime,

<sup>1</sup> Kim Kihwan, "The 1997-98 Korean Financial Crisis: Causes, Policy Response, and Lessons," A paper presented at IMF-Singapore Government Meeting on *The High-Level Seminar on Crisis Prevention in Emerging Markets*, Singapore, 2009, pp. 12-13.



which are as cruel as they ever were, millions of North Koreans continue to suffer at the hands of their government.

But as they say, “hope springs eternal.” Korean policy toward North Korea has undergone numerous changes over the years motivated by the hope that some policy can be found that will persuade the North Korean rulers to open and reform their society and move toward a peaceful reunification with the South. The most famous example of this hope was the “Sunshine Policy” promoted by former Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh My-hyun. The intention and motivation behind this policy was laudable but the implementation and results were a failure.<sup>3</sup> It was another case of promise meeting the hard reality of life.

President Lee, who will step down in early 2013, has been steady with his principled approach to North Korea. He has gone on record as saying he would not pursue a summit talk with the North Korean leader unless North Korea shows it is genuinely interested in resolving nuclear issues and offering a formal apology to Korea for sinking the South Korean naval ship Cheonan and the shelling Yonpyongdo island. The so-called progressive sector of Korean society argues that President Lee’s hard line policy produced these unfortunate incidents, but this accusation flies in the face of memories of the many armed provocations North Korea has launched against South Korea over the last 60 years.

Korea’s next president will need a long-term North Korea policy aimed at transforming North Korean society—against the wishes of the Kim regime—into a society and economy that can eventually be merged with South Korean society and with the rest of the world. Unfortunately, it will not be possible to obtain unanimous support for any North Korea policy among the Korean electorate because a strangely ideological pro-North Korean segment of South Korean society actually believes that the North’s socialism is preferable to the South’s capitalism. This is a belief that could only be held by those who have not spent a few years living among the North Korean people.

#### **THE CHINA FACTOR: THE ELEPHANT THAT LIVES NEXT DOOR**

China’s growing market share for its consumer goods and its prodigious appetite for resources from other countries is widely recognized. Should China be viewed as a constructive giant or a destructive threat? For South Korea, China has so far been an economic boon but a political disappointment. On balance, the verdict is not in yet on whether China will ultimately be a benefit or a threat to Korea.

Take the case of China in Africa. China has dealt with Africa since Mao’s days, initially approaching African states as fellow members in the Non-Alignment Movement against Western countries and the former Soviet Union. The Chinese offered scholarships to African students to study in China, though African students were often segregated from Chinese students and citizens. After Mao, China continued to make efforts to gain African friendship. While American and European leaders have occasionally made brief visits to African states, China’s top leaders since Zhou Enlai have paid more extended trips to the African continent.

Today, China’s rapidly growing economy needs Africa’s resources, including oil, timber, minerals, cotton, and food. A retired admiral who worked in Africa told me that “Chinese fishing boats don’t care about the size of

<sup>2</sup> Dongcheol Kim, “Korean Experience of Overcoming Economic Crisis through ICT Development,” ESCAP Technical Paper, August 2009, pp. 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Kongdan Oh Hassig, “A Decade of ‘Sunshine’ in Korea: What’s the Result?” *Asian Conflicts Reports*, Issue 2, February 2009.



fish, whether they are young or adults, dead or alive; they collect them all with brutal force using bottom-sweeping nets that scoop up everything.”<sup>4</sup> The same may happen in the West Sea of Korea.

China’s greatest immediate threat to Korea is its policy toward North Korea. As long as China fears American dominance in the region and a potential unification of the two Koreas under democracy and a market economy, China will support North Korea as a buffer zone and a thorn in the side of the democracies. Ultimately, this policy harms China’s chance to become a genuine global leader, yet China has not altered its policy even when North Korea has attacked the South.

Korea buys a lot of food from China, including vegetables and processed food. Many Koreans visit China on business and for vacation, and Koreans make up the largest number of foreign students in China. China’s lack of enforced laws are a moral and practical hazard to all those who value the rights of the individual. Consider the problem of food safety: from the 2007 baby-milk-mixed-with-melamine scare to the March 2011 report of the steroid clenbuterol in pork products (to make the meat leaner) to the use of contaminated cooking oil in restaurants.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to enforce safety and health policies in any country, especially one as big as China, but one gets the feeling that until Chinese governance becomes independent of the Chinese Communist Party, with its closed-door leadership, those who come into direct contact with China will get little assurance that their health, safety, and freedom are being protected.

China-Korea trade is crucial for both countries, and Koreans have invested heavily in China. China is the world’s largest consumer market and an excellent outlet for Korea’s high-tech products. Yet, economic demands alone cannot be the basis of Korea’s relationship with China. The next Korean president must enlist Korea’s pool of talent in dealing with China and push China to adopt norms and values that are of fundamental importance to Korea and the democratic world. Otherwise, Korea may find itself caught in the net of a fisherman who will swallow it whole.

### **RELYING ON A PROVEN FRIENDSHIP**

In recent years Washington’s attention has been largely focused on the Middle East and South Asia, the breeding ground of terrorists. Other threats, including the development of a North Korean nuclear arsenal, have been mostly ignored. It is encouraging to observe that President Obama has recently acknowledged that Asia is an indispensable and strategic region of the world for Americans. If indeed the 21<sup>st</sup> century becomes the Asian century, the United States must not ignore that half of the world while it pursues a handful of terrorists.

Washington is going through election politics just like Korea. With a large national budget deficit and a stubbornly large trade deficit, the federal government is forced to rein in its spending and focus on rejuvenating its economy. Even the Defense Department will face spending cuts. But Washington wants to sustain a good alliance relationship with Korea, and most Koreans want American forces to stay in their country at least until the threats from North Korea disappear. Of course, people don’t want foreign troops on their soil unless they are absolutely necessary, and Koreans are no exception. Criticism of US troops in Korea is understandable, especially when American soldiers commit crimes against the Korean people.

<sup>4</sup> EU-America Strategic Dialogue on China, Paris, October 2005.

<sup>5</sup> “Food safety in China: In the gutter,” *The Economist*, October 29<sup>th</sup>-November 4<sup>th</sup> 2011, pp.49-50.



But considered in the context of Korea's organized gang crime and the run-of-the mill crimes that are as common in Korea as in most countries, the number of crimes committed by American soldiers, regrettable as they are, make an extremely small bump in Korean crime statistics. The possible alternative of a North Korean attack on a Korea without American troops, which would be a horrendous crime indeed, would not seem to be worth the danger of expelling those troops. This is something that the Korean government needs to repeatedly communicate clearly to its citizens, at the same time that American military authorities communicate to their troops the importance of being a good neighbor to Koreans.

Korea has changed much over the last 60 years; unfortunately, North Korea has not changed in terms of its leaders and their policies. The United States and Korea must continue to re-examine their security relationship in terms of burden sharing and status of forces, but the two countries should be wary of changing their game plan so long as the North Korean dynasty has not changed its plan. Korea and Japan will continue to be the two anchors of the US alliance in the Asia-Pacific. This alliance has helped keep the peace in the region and must do so in the future.

The next Korean president must grasp this reality and see the big picture of international relations, even if that view is not appreciated by all Koreans. Moreover, the president must make plans to move Korea more into the international security arena. Korea is now a medium-power country with a sizeable standing army. It must begin to consider how its own military forces can play a larger role in keeping the peace in Asia and around the world. Perhaps one example of Korea's projection of its military strength is the building of the Jeju Naval base. The issue is not about America but about Korea's security interests.

## **THE YOUTH AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

Science and technology have shaped our lives since the arrival of personal computers and the Internet. The global spread of cellular phones has created a virtual third wave revolution comparable to the industrial revolution and the political revolution in the 1990s that eliminated communism from serious consideration as a political system. Today we see the fruits of this communication revolution in the political revolution taking place in the Middle East.

President Obama's election was achieved in part thanks to the social media that were employed by his young supporters. In Korea, President Roh Mu-hyun also benefitted from the users of social media. While older Koreans stick to analog technology, the active and progressive youth take the digital road and are constantly coming up with new ways to get information and express themselves.

The new social media help people connect to each other, creating larger communities. These communities can pool their resources to work for their common good, as has happened in the nascent political movements in countries such as Burma, China, Malaysia, and Indonesia. However, thanks to the new social media, two worrisome issues face the next Korean president. First, the North Korean regime has learned how to use the Internet to agitate South Korean society. Partly by this means, the Kim regime has enjoyed some success in enlisting "pan-Korean" supporters who, despite their limited knowledge of life in North Korea, want to sabotage the Korean government. These media efforts are not run by the North Korean people, who have virtually no access to the Internet, but rather by a small cadre of North Korean government employees. There is nothing "pan-Korean" about this.



The Korean government must respect freedom of speech to the greatest extent possible. Instead of fearing the social media, the new president must promote a social media officer in the Blue House to advance a presidential vision and promote national policies to embrace this new means of communication.

### **EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION**

In marketing, “location, location, location” is the guide to make a store successful. In Korea, everything is “education, education, education.” Korean newspapers fill entire pages with news about tuition hikes, free lunch for all students (an issue that torpedoed the mayor of Seoul, who promised too much), and lonely “single” fathers whose wife and children live overseas to further the children’s education.

Educated Koreans have contributed enormously to the Korean economic miracle, and Korea is rightly famous for its high standard of education. But beneath the surface Korea faces a deeper and wider problem of education that has to be addressed as quickly as possible. Education made today’s Korea but education may ruin Korea in the future unless it is viewed in a more practical manner.

Education serves many purposes, from vocational training to self-enlightenment. Many kinds of education can be obtained by anyone, seeking it on their own. Not all education must come from schools, and certainly getting a degree is no assurance that one has received a valuable education. Not all people need to be trained as lawyers, medical doctors, or professors, just as not everybody has to have the same kind of body or face. People have different talents, personalities, styles of beauty and brains. Two outstanding societies that have achieved high standards of living and a good quality of life are Germany and Japan, yet neither of those countries mandates a single kind of education.

Let me relate two personal observations. In Japan, I came upon a small tempura restaurant in the high-rent Tokyo district of Akasaka. The restaurant can seat only about a dozen people at tables and another half-dozen at the counter. It is so popular that table seats must be reserved up to a month ahead of time for dinner. Yet it is a small family-run business that is content to make a small profit and produce a high-quality product. The owner-chef doesn’t need a college education, yet he is living a rewarding life and performing a valuable social service. Japan is filled with these people, as is Korea. Some education can help these businesses compete in the marketplace and produce a better product at lower cost, but four years of college or an advanced degree will not make the tempura taste any better. A medical doctor or scientist is not performing any greater social service than is this restaurant owner. Japan’s economic success is owed not just to its scientists and corporate managers but to the millions of Japanese workers who find it rewarding to do a good day’s work. This is a lesson all countries need to learn.

Or take the case of Germany, famous for its automobiles and machinery (not to mention its tasty bread and beer). Germany has many training programs for its workers. They do not need to go to college. They earn much respect from their fellow citizens for being good at their jobs. The German vocational education system grooms healthy and skillful students who become the backbone of the German economy. Wages and benefits reflect this good education system. Factory workers can make as much money as college educated managers because they are paid for their work ethic.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A year in Germany from August 1990 to August 1991 to observe the German unification





Turning to Korean society, it can be argued that far too many people go to college for four years: years filled with tuition anxiety and worry about future jobs. Korea needs to build a stronger community college system where students can acquire more practical skills. This does not doom them to ignorance. They can always take further classes that interest them, and nothing prevents them from continuing their studies throughout their lives. The respect they gain should depend on what they think and what they say, not on what degree they received. A good baker makes everybody happy while an unemployed college graduate makes everybody miserable. The next president must deal with serious education reform and prevent Korea from rushing headlong into a mindless pursuit of educational degrees.

### **WHEN MY FRIEND'S ENEMY BECOMES MY FRIEND**

At the turn of the previous century, Korea was divided deeply between progressive reformers and conservative forces that refused to imitate Japan's modernization. Pro-Chinese and pro-Japanese forces fought bitterly for power, while encroaching Western and neighboring powers kept their greedy eyes on Korea. Japan went through a sweeping modernization to catch up with the Western industrial powers in order to compete against them and become one of them. A historian in my college days once calmly told me "Japan unifies to overcome a national crisis; Koreans fight each other. Korea's loss of sovereignty to the Japanese was not achieved by Japan alone."<sup>7</sup>

Korea has gone through much turmoil in its history. It is a good country in which to study political science theories, from colonialism to civil war to political revolution against corrupt governments. It is also a rich theater to study economic and social change theories.

In a recent international conference I attended in Ghana, I learned that many African officials and academics know something about Korea and want to learn more. A young policy analyst from Nigeria wanted to visit Korea and compare its experiences with China's. A Senegalese university professor plans to visit Korea on his way back from China next year. (Tip to tourism officials: piggybacking tourism has much to recommend it!) The Africans had also heard much about North Korea. The consensus was that it was worse than Zimbabwe, generally considered to be the last bastion of bad dictatorships in Africa.

South Korea is the host of an interesting "South-North" conflict today. People in the radical dissident anti-American camp embrace the belief that their rival's enemy must be their friend; that is, their hatred of the Korean government and the United States gives them reason to support the North Korean government. This kind of thinking can even be found among Roman Catholic priests, who one would think would judge the worth of a government on Christian principles. Indeed, religious leaders whose vocational call is presumably to serve the people in a Christ-like manner have transformed themselves into vanguard activists to protest at the Jeju naval base construction sites. They declare that it is their job is to sabotage government construction sites in the name of peace. Such simplistic thinking is not worthy of a priest (and calls into question the value of a priestly education).

The Korean National Assembly's failure to pass the North Korean human rights bill is a good example of a double standard. How can anyone doubt the abominable level of human rights in North Korea? How can any-

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<sup>7</sup> A dialogue with a teacher during the second year of the college, Sogang University, 1972, Seoul. The teacher was Professor Yi Kibaek, a renowned historian.



one forget that perhaps thousands of Koreans from the South are still alive and kept against their will in North Korea? Anyone who fears that passing such a bill will make the Kim regime angrier with South Korea has not noticed that for the last 60 years the South Korean government has been treated with contempt by the Kim regime in the North. What purpose is served by trying to please such a regime at this late date?

Ideological division exists between conservative and liberal camps in all countries. In the United States, much of the division is based on different views of the role of government, but there is little argument about the standards of human rights or the advantages of democracy and the market economy over dictatorship and the socialist command economy. That such issues are still debated in Korea suggests that the next president has some serious communication work to do.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Korea has its share of problems to be faced by the next president. All countries have their problems. What the democracies have in common is that voters tend to be swayed by emotional reasons and are often too short-sighted to make the kind of decisions that will guide their country over the next decade or more. People expect too much or expect too little from their elected officials. They don't realize that in the everyday world of politics, the most effective leader is one who has sound principles, ready intelligence, and the ability to work with and communicate to others. It is not the candidate who promises the most or agrees with the voters. Leaders are elected to lead, not to follow. Voters won't know exactly where they will be lead because new situations will come along that require new tactics. But voters can try to judge who will have the best chance of leading them on the correct path by looking at how steadily that candidate has lead in the past. And through all the campaign hype, they can try to get an idea of each candidate's character. In the American movie *Dave*, about a corrupt president who slips into a coma and is replaced by a look-alike, when it is time for the imitation president to step aside and hand the reins of government back to elected officials, he says of the vice president, whose specific policies he is unacquainted with, "He is a good man." And that's what counts most.

As for specific policies, it is my opinion that no Korean president should expect that Korea can be isolated from the troubles of the world economy. No president should expect that he can become a friend of whoever is running the North Korean regime. Speaking as an American who was raised as a Korean, I am convinced that, despite all its faults, the United States has been a good and steady friend of Korea and will continue to be so in the future. American principles are the same as the principles that most Koreans have embraced, and by that token alone America's friendship should be valued.

Yet finally, as Lord Palmerston, one of England's great leaders, once said, "We have no perpetual allies and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual." No Korean president should put all the country's eggs in one basket and expect that China, or Russia, or even the United States will be the country's best friend forever. The next Korean president, and his or her successors, should continue to make Korea a strong nation that can pursue its own interests while keeping in step with other countries. This requires presidential leadership, and it requires that all Koreans think about pulling together and making their families, communities, and nation an economic and social success.

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**Remarks:**

Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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