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“South Korean Policy Toward the U.S. During the Bush Presidency”

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Introduction

How can Korea be best understood and most influential in the United States? All Koreans who appreciate the importance of the United States to Korea consider this subject from time to time. Koreans who hold positions in government, the media, business or academia, who are the nation's elite ambassadors, debate the question constantly. I have the pleasure of knowing some of your senior diplomats, and they are top-notch professionals. They, and you, are working now in a diplomatic territory very different from that of previous Korean administrations and that territory is likely to get more complex very soon.

Many of my friends and colleagues in Washington have far more experience with Korea than I do. They have been coming here in official and unofficial capacities for decades, while I began my education on Korean affairs just 10 years ago. My views are the result of a particular experience with Korea: highly political, highly policy-oriented, and highly contemporary. Because of this unusual introduction to your colorful, warm, combative, big-hearted country, I have found myself over the years with a view of developments slightly different from many of my more experienced colleagues. And it has seemed to me that the elements of analysis with which I am most familiar - the political and the contemporary - were precisely those which were often missing or under-appreciated by the government and among the experts. This is the main reason I continue to try to make some contribution to the understanding of Korea in Washington.

Past Korean Governments in Washington

Many diplomats and scholars in Washington and Seoul remember one particular period in the 1970s when they think of Korea's diplomatic history in the United States. That is the so-called "Koreagate" affair of 1977, involving former Ambassador Kim Dong-jo and rice dealer Park Tong Sun. It may well be that, while valuable lessons were learned by both countries during this episode, it is time for some of them to be unlearned. Current efforts to tell Korea's story in the United States, to get its message out, to organize friends on Korea's behalf, and to formally lobby the U.S. government are still made sensitive and controversial by the residue from the 1970s. Quite apart from the real restraints on diplomatic spending by the Korean government, these lingering sensitivities among both Korean diplomatic officials and Americans in the government, Congress and the press inhibit the mounting of a forceful and coordinated effort.

I will not try to catalogue weaknesses of past Korean diplomacy or suggest a comprehensive list of things to do. I am sure that government ministries, think tanks and universities have many good studies and private analyses of these subjects, some of them very current. (I would also observe that my own government has experienced de-funding and alarming cutbacks in diplomatic representation around the world in the past decade, with very serious long-term consequences for the dissemination of America's message.) I also do not intend to criticize the team at the Korean Embassy in Washington. Their work is superior and I know them to be some of your best professionals. Rather, I will pull out a few points that seem to go to the heart of the diplomatic legacy that you inherited in 1998.

First, the continuing standoff on the DMZ and the need for a substantial U.S. troop presence in Korea have both underscored the Korean role of "Cold War outpost." Add to this the profound effect of the authoritarian years, which resulted in a relatively inward-looking and defensive posture by Korea in the United States. It was hard for Korea to demand respect from the United States, or to be treated like a "normal" country, while its undemocratic political system and image as a tense battleground were foremost in the minds of Americans. It was easy to feel that the U.S. side looked down on the South Korean partner.

Secondly, foreign policy in these years was often the extension of domestic political battles to foreign shores, and the image of Korea was always damaged as a result. Well into the 1990s, Korean diplomatic efforts seemed to focus on only three narrow goals:

- 1) Preventing any country's contact with North Korea without the coordination and blessing of Seoul, thereby carrying on the peninsular battle for legitimacy;
- 2) Boosting the image of the Korean president through symbols of endorsement, since he would always feel a legitimacy deficit;
- 3) Smearing the reputation, image and integrity of the domestic opposition, to prevent it from gaining overseas support.

These efforts were both very successful and very damaging. While the Roh Tae Woo and Kim Young Sam governments both made great strides toward Korea's democratic development - and without widespread violence, it should be noted - I agree with those who judge that the questions of political legitimacy and Korean international self-confidence were only settled conclusively with the election of 1997. In the aftermath of that election, even many who had voted for the government party appreciated the huge boost in international recognition, respect and even legitimacy that resulted from the peaceful transfer of power to the opposition.

Thirdly, one of the continuing themes in efforts of Koreans to influence Washington is the idea that only a meeting with the top official or senior person will produce results. Regardless of the roots of this instinct, in practice it continues to undercut a systematic approach to reorienting Korean diplomacy. To this day one often sees the same combination at work among official and unofficial visitors to Washington: a failure to do the forward planning and decide on a clear message, together with last-minute frantic efforts to get to the top official, sometimes employing unofficial and dubious channels in the process. Very often the value of the resulting meeting is undercut in two ways: insufficient planning and attention to policy substance means the exchange is not satisfying, and the method of contact appears to be unprofessional and suspicious of official channels.

Awareness and understanding of this history can help Koreans choose the best tools for engaging their American friends in the coming decade, and counter impressions of Korea that are no longer relevant.

Kim Dae Jung in Opposition

Official and unofficial Washington is influenced by two critical and long-standing networks as they interact now with the Kim Dae Jung administration. One is the ongoing, highly diverse complex web of contacts and relationships between the diplomatic, military and intelligence bureaucracies and the expert communities of the two countries. The other is the partly overlapping but largely distinct network of relationships cultivated between Kim Dae Jung and the opposition party and their contacts in and out of the U.S. government since the 1970s.

The U.S. bureaucrats and officials, because they were in official capacities, received a Korean government view of the opposition party and its officials. While many individual U.S. officials took pains to maintain relations with opposition figures, the great majority of American views established in those years reflected the ongoing propaganda battle between the government and pro-democracy forces. It was entirely possible for officials to be aware of this environment in Korea and at the same time to be influenced by it. It was also true that even many officials who admired Kim found it impossible to risk the wrath of the Korean government by meeting with him. This was true right up to Kim's election in December 1997. Universities also risked their Korean funding sources if they hosted the opposition leader during this period. This domestic struggle was carried out across the U.S., and its damage to Korea's image was substantial and lasting.

In contrast to the official bureaucracy, the expert community in Washington had a wider range of contacts with Kim and the opposition during the 1990s. Some worked in an advisory capacity for the Korean government. Some advised the opposition. And a miniature and somewhat muted version of the domestic Korean political battles played out in Washington seminars and policy papers.

Part of Kim Dae Jung's strategy in these years was to relentlessly court Republicans and conservative figures in Washington. This made sense because many of the most experienced U.S. experts were Republicans, and also because views of Kim among this group were most likely to be negative, influenced by government suggestions that Kim was everything from corrupt to anti-American to pro-Communist. Kim's efforts to change his image among U.S. officials in general and Republicans in particular were largely successful, judging by their acceptance and support for him in the first years of his administration.

Kim and his party also worked hard to carry a consistent, policy-rich program to Americans at all levels. They carefully calibrated policy suggestions to U.S. security, economic and political interests in Korea. This work helped skeptics understand the moderate, pro-U.S. program of the opposition, and undermine opposition to Kim in Washington. In promoting his North Korea policy views, Kim was able to be a leader in the public debate because, in contrast, the position of the Korean government at the time was perceived to lack consistency and cohesion.

At the same time, Kim and the National Congress for New Politics (NCNP) may have neglected their natural friends in the U.S. Congress and the administration. As late as April 1997, the same officials who would later hail Kim Dae Jung as the “Asian Nelson Mandela” refused to allow meetings with him at a level higher than Assistant Secretary of State. Given the context of the times, it is difficult to justify this arms-length treatment, even allowing for the desire to placate the famously sensitive South Korean administration.

The Kim Dae Jung Government in Washington

Since the February 1998 inauguration of President Kim Dae Jung, working-level and senior officials in the ROK and United States have experienced their best relationship ever. This is partly the result of a fortunate coincidence of views between the Kim and Clinton administrations. But it is also the inevitable and logical result of the U.S.-Korea relationship coming into better balance. Koreans feel a strengthening of democratic freedoms at home and more power on the world stage, partly as a result of President Kim’s international stature and partly as a result of the remarkable economic recovery since 1998. The North-South summit of June 2000, arranged without outside assistance, may well be another factor in Korea’s growing self-confidence. Suddenly, the Korean story in Washington has many dimensions, and some of them are very positive.

As Kim Dae Jung assumed the presidency in early 1998 I had the opportunity to talk with several of the top Washington public relations firms about their proposals to represent the new government. They included Democratic and Republican firms, old Korea hands, former officials and lawmakers. Some of the proposals were comprehensive, some showed sophistication, all were expensive. Such an effort would have cost between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000 per year. At the time, friends of Korea strongly believed it was absolutely critical to mount such an effort. But in the context of the national economic pain being endured in Korea it was not possible to do so. This question should be revisited regularly, so that a more thorough program can be initiated whenever resources are found for the promotion of Korean interests in Washington. Perhaps the initiative should come from Korean companies, creating a fund for promotional work in the U.S.

There is one misperception that seems to have taken hold among both Koreans and Americans over the past three years. From the Korean side, this is the confusion of personal respect and admiration for President Kim with understanding and support for his policies, particularly that of engagement with North Korea. As we are constantly reminded, “all politics is local.” And this applies to figures in Washington who, for institutional, intellectual or ideological reasons were skeptical of Kim, his engagement policy, and North Korea. It has been clear since well before Kim was elected President that some of his admirers did not share his policy views.

From the U.S. side there was, during the Clinton administration, an eagerness to celebrate President Kim’s personal story while paying little attention to the policy direction and the importance of high level coordination that Kim argued for. The administration soon embraced the principle of close coordination and support for South Korea’s policy activism. Still, by the time William Perry was asked to lead a policy review the effort by the Clinton team to promote

specific ROK policies was failing for lack of high-level attention and active promotion in and out of government. It was only after the North-South summit, with real achievements in view, that the level of attention was raised.

No doubt the President's "rock star" status continues to be a great asset to South Korea in Washington, as it is all over the world. But the changes in Korea's internal dynamic, together with its new regional and global roles, should not be neglected in the process of using the President's drive and vision. Rather, this very rare occurrence, whereby Korea has in its president a statesman who continually commands world attention, should be used to educate its closest ally about the changing nature of their relationship. South Korea has become a country of consequence in the most important issues of the day. In contrast to years past, these issues go beyond the matter of deterring North Korea. Several developments underscore this change:

1. The dispatch of South Korean troops to East Timor under UN auspices provoked a fascinating debate among the public and policy elites about taking on new responsibilities;
2. The global drive, begun in the first months of the Kim Dae Jung administration, to secure not only a consensus among major powers on how to bring North Korea "in from the cold," but also to establish a solid structure for security and economic development in the region;
3. The recent courting of South Korea by China, Russia and the United States for support on WTO membership for China, National Missile Defense for the U.S., a seat at the table for Russia, among other issues;

This last point is particularly striking, and puts South Korea in a position of power. This will not be a comfortable position, but it provides diplomatic and other opportunities that can greatly enhance the country's international stature. The new position will surely require a whole new core of diplomats and informal ambassadors who appreciate the new complexity of Korea's position and are sophisticated about how to maximize its advantages. (Here I would encourage the posting of mid-career diplomats to Georgetown University, which is now being discussed, as well as to 6- or 12-month postings to the Atlantic Council of the United States, which will provide a different but highly valuable experience in Washington.)

Leading up to the U.S. election of 2000, tensions rose among the Korea experts here. The proposed visit to Pyongyang by President Clinton served to polarize opinion about blame and credit in North Korea policy. That tension was somewhat reduced in the first months of the Bush administration, leading up to the Bush/Kim summit of early March. But it has reappeared, with new strength, as critics and advocates of engagement square off on the question of U.S. responsibility for the loss of momentum in North-South and North-U.S. diplomacy. Following the Bush "re-engagement" of mid June 2001, the debate takes on a new flavor, but it will continue in new ways. The new focus for the debate may well be new ROK public and elite objections to the Bush policy, and new opposition to ROK efforts to make progress with North Korea outside the trilateral (U.S.-Japan-ROK) framework.

Effective Diplomacy during the Bush Administration

The statements last week from President Bush and Secretary of State Powell were long-awaited and a welcome first step toward moving forward toward reducing the North Korean threat and helping to draw that country into the international community. There was an expectation as I left Washington that Bush administration policy toward North Korea would become more clear in the

wake of Foreign Minister Han Seung Soo's visit. Now the Bush administration has met with North Korean representatives and soon the details of the approach will be clearer.

In any case, the U.S. posture toward the two Koreas has changed. While it will take a minimum of several weeks to see how specifically the approach will be different, a new reality for the Korean government is at hand, and a new approach will be needed. This is not essentially a matter of assessing blame. It is more a matter of assessing the national interest, the different roles of the several actors, and what can be accomplished in short and medium time frames.

The need of the Kim government to do as much as possible both with North Korea and with the reorientation of Korean diplomacy in general is serious. The government that follows this one will almost certainly be more constrained by domestic interest groups and less able to act with independence and consistency. Those were strengths (and some would say weaknesses) of the current administration that are directly attributable to President Kim's standing and history, and are not likely to be features of the next administration.

It was to be expected that Korea's diplomatic history would be difficult to overcome for the more democratic, self-confident South Korea of today. What is most important is for the government, the foreign policy community, and the public to have a new vision of Korea that is cohesive, confident and inspiring and that can be carried overseas with force.

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