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How to Deal with South Korea

The United States has been coping with a new phenomenon since 2002: a South Korea that can say "no" to America. Along with Japan and the Philippines, South Korea used to be one of the staunchest U.S. allies in Asia. From 1950 to 1953, 54,000 Americans lost their lives to defend South Korea from North Korean and Chinese Communist forces. The United States has since poured more than $13 billion in economic aid and military assistance into the country, and it still maintains approximately 29,500 troops there. Yet, despite these past and present contributions to its security and modernization, more and more Americans feel that South Korea no longer appreciates their efforts and is growing ungrateful, uncooperative, and in some cases downright hostile. A bipartisan consensus appears to be developing in the United States on this point. Troubled by the spread of anti-U.S. sentiment in South Korea, Senator Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) lamented that South Korea is suffering from "historical amnesia."[1]

Americans experienced a full dose of this new reality in 2002. In June of that year, a U.S. armored vehicle accidentally killed two South Korean middle-school girls. When the driver and navigator of the vehicle were acquitted despite their conflicting statements in a U.S. court marshal, hundreds of thousands of South Koreans took to the streets. Ordinary citizens joined candlelight vigils to protest the injustice of the verdict, and some students even burned U.S. flags to express their outrage. In a break with the past, South Koreans were no longer willing to give U.S. military personnel a free pass for the sake of national security.

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Anti-Americanism is not a new phenomenon in South Korea. In fact, it constituted one of the strongest undercurrents of the intense and protracted pro-democracy movement of the 1980s. When Chun Doo-hwan's military regime brutally suppressed a pro-democracy movement in Kwangju in May 1980, many South Koreans suspected that Washington was behind Chun's actions.[2] The decade was marked by intermittent eruptions of high-profile demonstrations and protests against U.S. support of Chun's dictatorship, such as the arson at the U.S. Cultural Center in Pusan in 1982 and the occupation of the U.S. Cultural Center in Seoul in 1985.[3]

The younger 386 generation feels far more ambivalent toward the United States.

Given the appeal of American popular culture and general respect for the ideals of the U.S. political and economic system in South Korea, however, rising South Korean anti-Americanism certainly does not mean rejecting everything associated with the United States. It can be more accurately described as frustration and anger at Washington for general disrespect and certain specific U.S. policies, particularly toward North Korea.[4] Conspicuous in the current upsurge of anti-U.S. sentiment in South Korea, however, is that it is not limited to a radical fringe of the dissident movement. It appears to be becoming ubiquitous, in civil society, academia, and even in the government.

The presidential campaign of Roh Moo-hyun, a relatively young human rights lawyer who had never visited the United States prior to his election in December 2002, benefited substantially from the high tide of anti-U.S. sentiment in South Korea. His election is both a significant result and an example of a more self-confident, occasionally anti-U.S. South Korea. This transition is the result of several important changes in South Korea's economy, politics, and external relations during the past few decades. Some, particularly in the United States, may fear that South Korea has become anti-U.S. and is strategically shifting toward China. Such a conclusion confuses the symptoms of changes in South Korea for their causes. Instead, a combination of South Korean economic development over time, the rise of a new generation in South Korean politics, and changing inter-Korean relations help explain a Seoul that has become more fundamentally independent than anti-U.S. or pro-Chinese.

Economic Development Creates a New Context

South Korea's remarkable economic development since 1960, by reducing Seoul's dependence on the United States, has provided the background for a

reexamination of its traditional patron-client relationship with Washington and has expanded the range of choices for broader foreign policy decisions.

When a student demonstration brought down the corrupt Rhee government in April 1960, South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world. Its 1960 gross domestic product per capita was lower than that of some sub-Saharan African and most Latin American countries, as well as many of its Asian neighbors.[5] Although South Koreans appreciated U.S. aid at the time, many were aware that Seoul's aid dependence carried significant costs. When Washington used its aid leverage to force South Korea's military government to scrap its initial economic development plan in 1962 and to honor its commitment to restoring an elected regime by the next year, Park Chung-hee and his followers adopted an aggressive export-led industrialization strategy to prevent such vulnerability in the future.[6]

As a result of the above strategy, South Korea averaged an annual growth rate of eight percent over the subsequent decades and joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 1994. South Korea is now the world's twelfth-largest economy and holds the fourth-largest foreign reserves. It is one of the top five producers in the world of ships, automobiles, electronics, and steel. Seoul's new status as an economic middle power has enabled it to take an active role in regional cooperation in East Asia as well as in multilateral trade negotiations. It is the seventh-largest U.S. trading partner, ahead of such European countries as France and Italy, enabling it to deal with the United States on more equal terms.

Although South Korea has rather consistently grown economically since the 1960s, South Korea's perception of the United States has not suffered a continuous decline over the same period. Anti-U.S. sentiment in South Korea seems to have reached a peak in the mid-1980s, after which it began to decline, before recording another peak in recent years. There is thus no direct causal relationship between South Korea's economic position and its attitude toward the United States. The fluctuations are based more on specific incidents resulting from changes in political leadership and policy preferences.

The New Elites Break with Tradition

South Korea's growing self-assertiveness is also a product of its self-induced democratization. Along with some formerly Communist countries in eastern Europe, South Korea democratized from the bottom up via social movements.[7] Students who led the movement against the Rhee regime in April 1960 were later joined by industrial workers, intellectuals, and religious leaders in the 1970s in their campaign against Park's dictatorship. Later, the triple solidarity of students, workers, and religious leaders expanded even further to include

middle-class citizens in the democracy uprising of June 1987.[8] South Korea's democratic transition in 1987 was in large part the fruit of these persistent pro-democracy struggles by social movement activists and opposition politicians throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

The "386 Generation"—South Koreas who were in their 30s, who went to universities in the 1980s, and who were born in the 1960s—emerged as a driving force in South Korean politics during the 1990s, being well equipped with excellent organizational and leadership skills acquired during the intense pro-democracy struggles of the 1980s. Many former movement organizers have also successfully entered the political arena as legislators, party leaders, lawyers, judges, policymakers, and government officials. The proportion of 386 Generation politicians among the members elected to the National Assembly sharply increased from 24.3 percent in 1996 to 32.9 percent in 2000 to 45.9 percent in 2004.[9] Their movement into the political establishment helps to explain why anti-U.S. sentiment in South Korea today is more extensive and powerful.

Even North Korea's nuclear test did not change South Korea's stance toward Pyongyang.

These new South Korean politicians and policymakers do not agree with their parents' and grandparents' views of the United States. To older generations, the United States was a savior, rescuing South Korea from a possible Communist takeover during the Korean War and from abject poverty in the 1950s. Their general attitude was one of profound gratitude and unwavering loyalty. In contrast, the 386 Generation and their younger cohorts feel far more ambivalent toward the United States. Younger South Koreans never experienced the devastation of war and abject poverty of the 1950s, and they do not see the United States as a savior. Many of them risked their lives fighting authoritarian regimes and are understandably proud of their country's economic development and democratization.

They do acknowledge that Washington supported South Korea's democratization on a number of occasions.[10] The Rhee regime would have never been overthrown without the withdrawal of U.S. support in 1960. Washington intervened to save the life of Kim Dae-jung, a prominent opposition leader and democracy activist, from the murderous Korean Central Intelligence Agency in the mid-1970s. The United States also helped South Korea's pro-democracy movement during the 1970s via various civil society assistance programs for religious organizations and human rights groups. Most of all, the United States played a vital, although rather belated, role in promoting South Korea's 1987 democratization by dispatching government officials and making public

statements to warn the Chun government against another military coup and to push for a democratic transition.

Young South Koreans can also point, however, to several examples of U.S. duplicity. Park's military coup in 1961, which toppled the democratically elected government of Chang Myon, was rewarded and legitimized by President John F. Kennedy's warm welcome of Park during his official trip to the United States in November 1961. Throughout the early 1980s, when many 386 Generation youths risked their lives to fight for democracy, Washington largely remained silent. Most critically, because the commander in chief of the Republic of Korea–U.S. Combined Forces Command held operational control of the South Korean Army, many South Koreans argue that Chun's brutal suppression of the pro-democracy movement in Kwangju in May 1980 would not have been possible without the United States' implicit endorsement or active support. In February 1981, after Chun's suppression of the democracy movement and subsequent takeover of power, President Ronald Reagan welcomed Chun to the White House as his second foreign guest since being inaugurated. Looking back, this condoning of a violent dictatorship stands in stark contrast to the harsh U.S. condemnation of the Chinese government after the 1989 Tiananmen massacre.

The current anti-U.S. sentiment in South Korea is thus a function of young South Koreans' perception of the ambiguous U.S. role in the checkered history of South Korean democratization. Whenever young South Koreans see the United States, particularly the current Bush administration, carrying the torch of democracy promotion around the globe, they cannot help but recall the contradictory U.S. role in South Korea and be suspicious of Washington's motives. They question the traditional patron-client relationship that has been the status quo since the 1950s.

For the next several decades, this new breed of progressive-minded South Koreans will constitute a sizable portion of the adult population. South Koreans born after 1960 accounted for 64.3 percent of the South Korean population in 2000. According to a Korea Society Opinion Institute public survey conducted in November 2006, 68.9 percent of those in their 20s defined themselves as "progressive," greatly exceeding the national average of progressives of 44.6 percent in all age groups.[11]

Inter-Korean Rapprochement Changes the Equation

The last cause for South Korea's increased self-assertiveness vis-à-vis the United States is the substantially changed relationship between North and South Korea. The competition between the systems of the capitalist South and Communist North during the 1960s and 1970s fell apart as North Korea

slowly degenerated into an economic disaster in the 1980s.[12] The virtual end of the competition with North Korea has had significant psychological effects on South Koreans.

Most importantly, the anti-Communist, that is, anti–North Korean, propaganda that maintained a sense of emergency and repressed pro-democracy movements during the Park and Chun authoritarian regimes no longer proves persuasive. Meanwhile, the withering of the North weakens the argument that South Korea needs to maintain positive relations with a strong patron such as the United States to deter an aggressive North. Finally, the horrific images of undernourished children during the North Korean famine of the late 1990s have had a significant impact on the South Korean psyche, undermining the traditional image of North Korea as a belligerent neighbor ready to attack South Korea at any moment.

At the same time, economic and social ties between the North and South are growing stronger. Since the historic summit between then-President Kim Dae-jung and Chairman Kim Jong-il in June 2000, there have been a series of successful collaborative projects between the South and the North. Railroads are being connected, and as a result, an increasing number of South Koreans are visiting North Korean tourist attractions. In 2005 alone, more than 300,000 South Korean tourists visited Mt. Kumgang, which operated at a deficit for years due to overly optimistic initial business plans. At the Kaesong Industrial Complex, just north of the demilitarized zone, South Korean companies employ more than 10,000 North Korean workers to make clothes, shoes, and many other products for the countries' mutual benefit. It would be an exaggeration, however, to claim that South Korea no longer regards North Korea as a threat. Although they see North Korea as a needy neighbor, South Koreans do not dispute that it is also a potential troublemaker that can wreak havoc on the Korean peninsula and around the globe.

The question of how to deal with North Korea, however, has caused a significant amount of friction with the United States, especially since the Bush administration took over the White House in 2001. The crux of the disagreement is that some of the U.S. options for dealing with Pyongyang are unthinkable for South Korea, primarily because of its geographical proximity to North Korea and also because of South Koreans' changing perceptions of their brethren to the north. Military options, which could potentially escalate into nuclear war, could annihilate the entire peninsula. The massive refugee flood, regional insecurity, and potentially irreversible economic downturn that regime collapse or change could cause could easily nullify the economic prosperity and political freedom that South Koreans have achieved over the past 60 years. To avoid such nightmarish scenarios, many South Koreans argue that North Korea must be consistently engaged and carefully managed.

From 1998 to 2000, the United States and South Korea developed an effective division of labor in dealing with North Korea, by which the United States would contain North Korea's nuclear and missile programs through direct negotiations while South Korea would promote internal changes in North Korea through economic engagement. The United States also reached an understanding with North Korea to secure better access in South Korea as U.S.–North Korean relations improved, as encapsulated in the U.S.–North Korean joint communiqué of October 2000. Through this more-for-more approach, the United States sought to resolve suspicions about North Korea's "hole in the ground" at Kumchangri, the underground site at which it was suspected North Korea might be building nuclear facilities, and its incipient uranium-enrichment program. The Bush administration abandoned this approach in 2001 and called North Korea part of the "axis of evil" in January 2002. South Korean political leaders have subsequently become much more outspoken about their disagreements and displeasure with U.S. policies in general, but particularly on how to resolve the North Korean crisis.

South Korea harbors strategic anxiety about China's growing influence on North Korea.

In an address to the World Affairs Council of Los Angeles in November 2004, President Roh unequivocally stated that South Korea would be opposed to policies of military attack, containment, or regime change toward North Korea, even though Washington had made it clear that these options remained on the table.[13] To encourage North Korea to return to the six-party talks in June 2005, South Korean foreign minister Ban Ki-moon asked U.S. officials to refrain from making provocative remarks about North Korea, such as calling it an "outpost of tyranny," as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice did during her 2005 confirmation hearings.[14]

Even North Korea's nuclear test on October 9, 2006, did not change South Korea's stance. South Koreans initially expressed anger at the Kim Jong-il regime for escalating tensions, but many soon redirected their frustration toward the Bush administration for refusing to engage in serious negotiations with North Korea. In fact, when asked by polling companies a few days after North Korea's nuclear test who bears the greatest responsibility for the nuclear crisis, South Koreans blamed the United States as much as they did North Korea. Their changed perceptions of their relationship with the North, because of North Korea's economic decline and inter-Korean rapprochement, make it increasingly difficult for South Koreans to understand Washington's use of hardline rhetoric and policy on this issue. Moreover, in a poll conducted one week

after the 2006 nuclear test, 62 percent of respondents were in favor of continuing inter-Korean economic cooperation projects.[15] They believe that these projects offer the best hope for promoting internal change in North Korea.

South Koreans find it difficult to understand why its longtime ally does not respect their changed perceptions, preferences, and interests, instead pursuing options that they deem unacceptable. Moreover, coupled with their recollection of the confusing U.S. role in their country's democratization, South Koreans' current disappointment with Washington could develop into a suspicion that the United States might play an equally equivocal role in building peace and accomplishing reunification of the Korean peninsula.

The China Factor: Not a Simple Story

At the same time, the relative importance of the United States to South Korea has been steadily declining with the rise of China, at least in economic terms. China has made impressive economic and geopolitical gains with South Korea since their normalization of relations in 1992. Before normalization, China bought only 1.4 percent of South Korea's exports in 1991 while the United States bought 25.8 percent. By 2003, however, China's share of South Korea's exports had increased to 18.1 percent while the U.S. share had declined to 17.7 percent. Although the United States remains one of South Korea's most important trade and business partners, the growth in China's relative importance is unmistakable. To benefit from China's spectacular economic growth and create a geopolitical environment conducive to peace and security in Northeast Asia, South Korea wants to maintain a close relationship with China.

Beijing and Seoul do cooperate closely in dealing with Pyongyang and Washington through the six-party talks. At the same time, however, South Korea has a strong incentive to hedge against a nonpeaceful rise of China and harbors strategic anxiety regarding China's growing influence on North Korea. There is a growing concern in South Korea that North Korea could become a de facto Chinese province if Beijing's economic and geopolitical influence on Pyongyang continues to increase.[16]

Because of the trends in South Korean–Chinese relations in recent years, some U.S. policymakers and scholars have overlooked these South Korean concerns, instead concluding that Seoul has become "a runaway ally full of appeasers" increasingly aligned with China.[17] According to these scholars, South Korea's anti-Americanism is indicative of a more fundamental shift in its allegiance from the United States to China. These concerns are overblown. The emergence of a confident and self-assertive South Korea implies more independent thinking in South Korea's foreign policy, not a shift to China at the United States' expense.

The controversy over the true ownership of the ancient kingdom of Koguryo in 2004 provides a clear example of how South Korea reacts when China is perceived to be overreaching on historical and geopolitical matters. In April 2004, the Chinese Foreign Ministry deleted references to Koguryo from the Korea country profile on its Web site. The Chinese government–sponsored Northeast Project of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences claimed that Koguryo was a Chinese vassal state, or regional province. When South Korea protested, China responded by deleting the entire pre–World War II history of Korea. With North Korea becoming increasingly dependent on China, some South Koreans interpreted the Chinese action as laying the historical foundation to expand its influence into the Korean peninsula. Given China's efforts to present itself as a benign and nonhegemonic power under the "peaceful rise" slogan, its handling of the delicate Koguryo issue came as a surprise to many Koreans.

> South Korean foreign policy is becoming more independent, not shifting toward China.

South Korea aims to support China's peaceful development and to prevent a U.S.-Chinese confrontation, which would likely have a very negative effect on the Korean peninsula. South Korean ambivalence toward China is not very different from the sentiment of the policy of "congagement," the combination of containment and engagement toward China promoted by some U.S. policymakers.[18] Although more hawkish U.S. policymakers may prefer the formation of an anti-Chinese bloc linking India, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Japan with the United States, the current mainstream view in Washington is consistent with Seoul's approach, placing greater emphasis on engagement than containment, avoiding the self-fulfilling prophesy of confrontation with China, and facilitating China's transition to becoming a responsible stakeholder in the international community.

An Independent Seoul

Given its economic development, political transition, and bilateral relations with North Korea, a confident and self-assertive South Korea is neither a "rebel without a cause" nor a fleeting phenomenon. Rather, South Korea's attitudinal shift has multiple causes and will endure through several future administrations. Faced with this newly assertive South Korea and the larger challenges of dealing with China and crafting a new regional order, Washington has two options.[19]

One is to ignore South Korea's transformation and try to maintain the traditional patron-client relationship within the hub-and-spoke alliance against

China, using the North Korean nuclear crisis as a catalyst. This policy, however, is likely to find little support in South Korea and may incite a nationalist backlash if the United States is increasingly viewed as an impediment to Korean reunification and regional security. It would also increase the possibility of a "Korea shift," i.e., South Korea moving closer to China and further away from the United States, and exacerbate a continental-maritime division in Northeast Asia.

Even if the U.S. objective were to contain China, its hard-line policy toward North Korea would likely be counterproductive, only helping China to expand its influence on the Korean peninsula. The United States would find itself increasingly tied to Japan, whose reluctance to come to terms with its past has limited the effectiveness of its diplomacy. Under this strategic approach, Washington essentially risks sacrificing the Korean peninsula to cement its relationship with Japan and contain China.

The alternative is to engage South Korea on equal terms as a means of managing China's gradual transition and resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis. This policy would require the United States to position itself as equidistant between China and Japan, consistently signaling to Beijing that the existing U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea are not designed to threaten it. At the same time, Washington would have to reassure Tokyo that this policy is not meant to avoid engaging Japan. The United States would play the role of a stabilizer in Northeast Asia, strengthening the U.S. position on the Korean peninsula while improving its options in dealing with China and Japan. It would also have the effect of encouraging Japan to improve its relations with its neighbors. Under this approach, South Korea would be an advocate for and a partner in promoting regional cooperation.

With a prosperous market economy, liberal democratic polity, and good relations with its neighbors, South Korea is a prime example of the importance and success of U.S. assistance and support in building democracies and establishing market economies in Asia. Rather than being bewildered by a "rebellious" South Korea, viewing its newfound strength as a puzzle and a threat, Washington should feel proud of the contributions it made to South Korea's economic and political development and respect South Korea as a grown-up ally to consult while evaluating its policies toward North Korea, Northeast Asia, and beyond.

Notes

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