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## The Two South Koreas: A House Divided

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## The Two South Koreas: A House Divided

South Korea today is a bitterly divided country. Clashes between conservatives (*posu*) and progressives (*chinbo*) over everything from the direction of economic and political reforms to the location of the nation's capital have created a deep domestic fissure. The rift has become especially pronounced and acrimonious since the election of President Roh Moo-hyun in December 2002. In the two years since assuming office, Roh, a progressive, has been relentlessly criticized and opposed by the conservatives. He was even impeached by the opposition in the National Assembly, his presidency saved only when the Constitutional Court overturned the motion.<sup>1</sup>

Roh, in turn, has taken every opportunity to challenge, threaten, and taunt the conservatives. Roh's Uri party recently proposed a law that would limit the circulation of the major conservative dailies. It is also trying to pass a law that would seek to identify and punish those who "collaborated" with the Japanese during the colonial period, such as former president Park Chung-hee, an officer in the Japanese Imperial army before liberation, whose daughter now happens to lead the opposition, and with the past authoritarian regimes, which includes most members of the opposition. In addition, the progressives are trying to abolish the 50-year-old National Security Law that the staunchly anti-Communist conservatives consider indispensable to guard against North Korean espionage and infiltration. The government has even tried to move the capital of the country farther south, to Yonki Prefecture in North Ch'ungch'ong Province, in an apparent attempt to escape Seoul, over which the conservative establishment is said to have a chokehold. The plan was dealt a severe blow when, on October 21, 2004, the Constitutional Court declared that such a move was unconstitutional and would require

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approval through a national referendum. The government is still trying, however, to relocate many government ministries and offices.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, the most contentious and ideologically charged issue with consequences far beyond the confines of South Korea's domestic political arena is the effort on the part of the progressive government to redefine the country's relationship with North Korea on one hand and the United States on the other. In this country, traditionally one of the closest U.S. allies and a bastion of anticommunism, a growing segment of the population has been turning anti-American and pro-North Korean. Roh himself was elected on a wave of anti-American sentiment precipitated by the June 2002 deaths of two South Korean schoolgirls, run over by a U.S. armored personnel carrier on exercise. If the South Korean government in the past invariably took the harder line when dealing with the North while the United States played a restraining role, now the roles have reversed, as Washington tries to pressure, sanction, and punish the North for its behavior while Seoul tries to engage and embrace it.

Some observers try to explain away anti-American and pro-North Korean views in South Korea as a largely harmless sign of the country's maturity, a manifestation of an effort to steer a more independent course in foreign policy vis-à-vis the United States. Others say that the changes in views are a reflection of the country's democratization, of increasing pluralism and diversity of opinion. Still others defend this shift by saying that it is a protest against the unilateralism of the current Bush administration and not against the United States itself. In reality, anti-American and pro-North Korean attitudes in South Korea are anything but passing trends or transitory reactions to a particular U.S. policy or administration, nor can one cheerfully dismiss them as signs of a maturing democracy. Rather, they are the logical extension of the current ruling coalition's "leftist-nationalist" ideology, which lies at the root of South Korea's deep division between conservatives and progressives. What, then, is the origin, nature, and potential future influence of this ideology that harbors an increasingly virulent form of anti-Americanism while coddling North Korea's regime?

## **Conservative Nation-Building**

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In 1965, South Korea had a per capita income of \$81, with 85 percent of its population living in rural areas in abject poverty. It had barely survived harsh colonial rule, devastating civil war, dictatorship, and coup d'état. Just 30 years later, its per capita income had risen to more than \$10,000. Today, South Korea has the 12th-largest economy in the world. Nearly 90 percent of South Koreans live in bustling urban centers, while the country boasts the

world's highest percentage of households wired to high-speed Internet services. It also enjoys a vibrant democracy consolidated through successful elections and political reforms.

Because South Korea met the twin goals of industrialization and democratization so quickly, it is easy to forget that they were spearheaded by two very different political coalitions, the conservatives and the liberals, locked in a fierce struggle for decades. Although Park Chung-hee (1961–1979) and Chun Doo-hwan (1980–1988) were the architects of South Korea's economic miracle, they were also the dictators who brutalized the opposition led by the likes of Kim Young-sam (1993–1998) and Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003), the champions of democracy. The two Kims and their followers never let up their challenge to the authoritarian rule of Park and Chun despite their obvious success in engineering economic growth. For both sides, however, industrialization and democratization were by and large shared goals. No one disputed the urgency of undertaking economic development. As for democracy, even the conservative authoritarian leaders always felt compelled at least to pay it lip service. Where the two sides differed was on priorities. The industrialization-first coalition wanted to delay democracy until the country was strong militarily and economically. The pro-democracy leaders disagreed. From the early 1960s to the late 1980s, the military and the conservative coalition that went along with it settled the debate.

Having experienced colonial exploitation, poverty, and the destruction of the Korean War, this industrialization-first coalition was determined to pursue economic development at all cost. For the sake of national security, which to them meant the prevention of another North Korean invasion, they became staunchly anti-Communist, while political, economic, and military mobilization became the order of the day. In the name of efficiency, productivity, and national security, human rights were given short shrift and democratic procedures were ignored. This coalition regarded the United States as South Korea's "savior" and ally, welcoming, indeed insisting on, the continued presence of U.S. troops on its soil. The alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea did become strained at times, such as during the 1970s because of the lack of progress in human rights and democracy.<sup>3</sup> The *raison d'être* of the alliance itself, however, was never questioned, at least not by Seoul, and neither side doubted that North Korea was the common enemy.

**Clashes between conservatives and progressives have created a deep domestic fissure.**

Starting in the late 1980s, South Korea began making a dramatic transition to democracy. In 1987 the country held its first free and direct presidential election in 20 years. The elections during the 1990s of Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung consolidated the South Korean democracy. During this period, the military establishment, as well as the collusive ties between government and business forged by the authoritarian governments of the past, became targets of reform. The two Kims continued to place high importance on South Korea's alliance with the United States. For both, the United States was more than just a military ally or provider of economic aid and, later, markets. Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung were beneficiaries of U.S. protection during their long years of struggle against the authoritarian governments. The United States had provided moral support as well as diplomatic pressure at crucial moments to save them from grievous harm. U.S. intervention twice saved Kim Dae-jung's life, after South Korea's own Korea Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) agents kidnapped him in Tokyo in 1971 and again when a court-martial sentenced him to death in 1980.

In the end, under conservative and then liberal leadership, South Korea had the best of both worlds. The country first went through successful industrialization under a conservative military dictatorship and then built up its democratic institutions when the liberal leaders of the pro-democracy movement took over. Both sides, each in its own way, regarded the United States as their benefactor. This is the South Korea that Washington had come to know and expect.

## **The Roots of Leftist Nationalism**

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Roh's election in 2002 marked the rise of the progressives in South Korean politics. The progressives consist of those politicians, intellectuals, and students who formed a coalition against military dictatorship during the 1980s. Yet, their worldview was vastly different from that of the earlier generation of pro-democracy fighters. If the ideals of liberal democracy inspired the earlier generation, the contradictions of capitalism created by South Korea's rapid industrialization during the 1960s and 1970s galvanized the progressives into action. As witnesses to the destruction of rural areas, they formed a deep antipathy to industrialization and urbanization. As they saw workers toil under inhuman conditions while living in ever expanding shantytowns around major cities, they came to regard capitalism as a dehumanizing system.

When such a deeply flawed system did not collapse despite the weight of its own contradictions and their own unceasing struggle, the progressives began searching for a deeper structural cause. What they purported to discover was the United States propping up a string of dictators in South Korea

for its own “imperial” and “hegemonic” interests on the peninsula and in the region. They also believed that they could trace the source of current maladies afflicting South Korea as far back as the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945) when Korea underwent forced modernization. Colonial industrialization not only skewed the industrial structure of Korea as a dependent economy of the Japanese empire, but also created a Korean bourgeois class that prospered by collaborating with the colonial masters.<sup>4</sup>

Here the crucial link between leftism and nationalism is revealed. Given the capitalist nature of the Japanese empire, to be a true nationalist meant being not only anti-Japanese, but also anti-capitalist. Some rightist, or bourgeois, nationalists claimed that one could be both nationalist and capitalist; but the leftists, who believed they were the only true nationalists, sought to evict the Japanese themselves as well as the capitalist system they had left behind.

According to the progressives, then, leftist nationalism should have been Korea’s guiding ideology after liberation in 1945. It failed to emerge, however, when the United States imposed direct military rule in South Korea during 1945–1947 and backed the establishment of a capitalist regime in 1948 and Cold War anticommunism began to overwhelm nationalism.<sup>5</sup> Most pro-Japanese collaborators went unpunished by the pro-U.S. capitalists because the newly installed government needed their help in fighting the Communists and in setting up a pro-U.S. regime in South Korea.<sup>6</sup>

The system became even more reactionary when Park, a former Japanese Imperial Army officer, seized power through a military coup in 1961. He hurriedly established formal diplomatic relations with Japan in 1965, scarcely 20 years after the occupation ended. Even though Japan provided as reparations an aid package totaling \$800 million, which the South Korean government invested in strategic industries that later became the mainstay of the country’s economic might, many viewed the hasty normalization of relations as a sellout.

In 1966, Park committed South Korean troops to the Vietnam War, becoming a U.S. “mercenary.” Although the war proved pivotal for South Korea’s economic growth as well as for upgrades to its military capability, the progressives saw it as a clear illustration of South Korea’s less than independent status vis-à-vis the United States. In 1980, Chun Doo-hwan grabbed power in the vacuum created in the aftermath of Park’s assassination the prior year, first through a coup d’etat and then through the bloody suppression of the Kwangu Democracy Movement, in which citizens of South Cholla province’s capital rose up in protest against military dictatorship. Although

**The election of Roh Moo-hyun in 2002 marked the rise of the progressives.**

Chun rose to power in a brutal manner to perpetuate the system created by Park, the fact that the United States stood by, albeit haplessly, only confirmed the progressives' view of South Korea as a militarist, capitalist, imperialist enclave under U.S. control.

Although the earlier generation of South Korean dissidents focused on the undemocratic nature of the authoritarian regimes, the progressives chose to focus on its antinationalistic character. For them, South Korea's problems derived not so much from the delay in democratization and mismanagement of industrialization but from the perception that these were the wrong goals with which to begin. Industrialization, in their view, was a capitalist-imperialist imposition to exploit South Korea's oppressed *minjung* (peasants and the proletariat).<sup>7</sup> Liberal democracy was a political system meant to perpetuate the class interests of the bourgeois that came to dominate South Korea with U.S. backing.

Once the roots of progressive ideology are understood, it becomes simple to see its natural link with pro-North Korean attitudes. Unlike the South, North Korea thoroughly purged the Japanese collaborators, many of whom then fled to the South. North Korea confiscated land from the landlords and redistributed it to the people. It steered an independent course in foreign policy between Beijing and Moscow during the Cold War and did not allow foreign troops on its soil, nor did it compromise with Japan. North Korea even seemed to be holding its own against the sole remaining superpower, the United States. For many progressives, North Korea stood for everything that the South did not: nationalism, anticapitalism, and anti-imperialism.

## **The Rise of the Progressives**

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Until the mid-1990s, such views were confined to the radical fringe of South Korea's intellectual and political spectrum. The financial crisis that crippled the South Korean economy in 1997, however, provided the opening through which the progressives and their ideology could enter South Korea's political mainstream. The crisis exposed the bankruptcy of the old system in more ways than one. The progressives had always argued that South Korea's political and economic system was illegitimate and morally bankrupt. The financial crisis revealed that even the vaunted economic system was hopelessly inefficient.

One of the most direct political consequences of the financial crisis, dubbed the "IMF [International Monetary Fund] crisis" in South Korea, was the election of Kim Dae-jung, longtime dissident and opposition leader, to the presidency in 1997. Despite Kim Dae-jung's uncontested standing as a leader of the pro-democracy movement, two factors had prevented him from being elected president. One was the fact that he was a son of Honam, the

southwestern region with a population much smaller than the Yongnam region that had produced four out of seven presidents to date. In a political system riven with primitive regionalist sentiments, Kim Dae-jung's election under normal circumstances was nearly impossible.

The second factor was the belief among the conservative segment of the South Korean electorate that he held dangerously leftist views. Indeed, Kim Dae-jung advocated an economic policy that emphasized welfare instead of growth. He also made it abundantly clear that, if he were elected president, he would adopt a much more conciliatory approach toward North Korea than previous leaders. The financial crisis created widespread panic and disgust among the population with the ruling conservative coalition's corruption and mismanagement of the economy, providing the opportunity for Kim Dae-jung to surmount his handicap.

**The contradictions of capitalism galvanized the progressives into action.**

For the first time, the presidency passed to an opposition candidate as the electorate seemingly overcame regionalism and conservatism. Progressives were heartened enough to decide to join the mainstream political process. Given their experience in organization, propaganda, and political mobilization—skills finely honed during their struggles against the authoritarian governments—many of them successfully transitioned to electoral politics. Kim Dae-jung, who needed to build a new political coalition to push through his “radical” policies, actively supported the endeavors of the radical progressives to join the political process. Many South Koreans, even those who disagreed with the progressives' worldview, also welcomed this infusion of new blood into a political system long since dominated by corrupt stragglers from the authoritarian years.

The new ruling coalition led by Kim Dae-jung and former radical student leaders of the “386 Generation,” so-called because their core members were in their 30s, were college students during the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s, began introducing South Korea to many ideas and policies that were once considered too leftist and hence taboo. The two most important in this regard were the anti-chaebol reforms and the “sunshine policy” toward North Korea.

### **THE ANTI-CHAEBOL REFORMS**

For the progressives, South Korea's chaebols, the infamous conglomerates that grew and prospered under preferential treatment meted out to them by authoritarian governments, represented the worst form of worker exploitation, led by a handful of capitalists and backed by the reactionary military



and U.S. imperialists. As such, they had to be dismantled and replaced with a more equitable distribution of wealth, supported by a welfare system. Given the power of the chaebol, such measures would have been impossible under normal circumstances. Yet, the late 1990s, after the Asian financial crisis, were not normal times.

The Kim Dae-jung administration's anti-chaebol reforms were reasonably successful because they initially received support from two very different constituencies: the workers whom Kim Dae-jung and the progressives repre-

sented, and the IMF, which, in exchange for the emergency bridge loan that it provided South Korea in 1997, came to dictate the economic policy of the country. Both the workers and the IMF had a common interest in weakening the power of the chaebols and cutting the close government-business ties that had been the hallmark of the South Korean economic system. The workers opposed the chaebols because they wanted a larger share of the pie that they had helped create.

**The 1997 financial crisis provided the opening for progressives to enter the mainstream.**

The IMF, on the other hand, wanted to dismantle the system according to its structural adjustment policies to make the South Korean economy more market friendly.

In the end, the IMF policy was enforced. Despite his intentions and contrary to the expectations of the progressives who initially supported him, Kim Dae-jung's reforms turned out to be more pro-market than those of any previous South Korean president. The workers realized too late that the reforms were not benefiting them. The destruction of the chaebols also meant the weakening or disintegration of the huge labor organizations that formed to struggle against the chaebols. Nevertheless, domestically, the effort to dismantle the chaebols and build a welfare system created an intellectual and political atmosphere conducive to the introduction of progressive ideas and policies into the mainstream.

### **THE SUNSHINE POLICY**

The sunshine policy also had two constituencies: liberals and progressives. On one hand, the policy was globally supported by liberals as a humanitarian policy. The fall of Pyongyang's patron the Soviet Union, the reluctance of China to support North Korea's adventurism, and the collapse of its economy made North Korea less of a threat to the outside world than to itself. With millions of its people starving to death, North Korea's system was preoccupied with regime survival and little else. The recommended policy

was to coax the reclusive regime out into the world and the ranks of normal states. The best way to do this was by offering humanitarian and economic aid, not threatening sanctions or war.

On the other hand, the engagement policy toward North Korea also fit perfectly with the leftist-nationalist ideology of the progressives. The policy appealed to their idea of the two Koreas: one nation divided into two states cooperating to decide the destiny and fate of the peninsula without the interference of foreign powers, the United States in particular. National reconciliation meant overcoming imperialist machinations that had brought about national division in the first place. The June 2000 summit between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il was a powerful illustration of the idea of national self-determination.

In the meantime, all the economic aid to the North, most of it in the form of direct cash transfers, that was decried by the conservatives was regarded by the progressives as justifiable aid to brethren in dire need. Anyone who opposed such transfers and other forms of aid to the North was branded a “conservative reactionary.” Those who argued that it was folly to unilaterally declare the end of the Cold War while a massive North Korean army remained poised across the 38th parallel and the regime continued to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) were considered warmongers. When Bush branded North Korea as one part of the “axis of evil” in his first State of the Union address, South Korea’s progressives were outraged. They regarded the Bush administration’s hard-line policy toward North Korea as typical of U.S. imperialism and obstructionism. The United States was the greatest obstacle to national reconciliation and reunification on the Korean peninsula.

## **The Limits of Progressivism**

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Old South Korea’s identity, based on development, authoritarianism, and anticommunism, does not appeal to the generation younger than the 386 Generation either. The conservative opposition is little more than a rag-tag assemblage of members of numerous former ruling coalitions with little background or ideology in common. The fact that they were able to avoid electoral disaster in the general election of April 2004 only by uniting under the leadership of Park Keun-hye, the eldest daughter of former president Park, reveals just how beholden they are to the past. In contrast, the progressives are ideologically motivated and politically mobilized. The ideology of welfare, egalitarianism, and national reconciliation with North Korea clearly appeals to the liberal and younger segments of the population. Roh’s Uri Party used his impeachment by the opposition-dominated National As-

sembly in March 2004 as an opportunity to garner public sympathy and support. In the following month's general election, Roh's party was able to engineer a stunning victory, going from less than 50 seats in the 299-seat National Assembly to a majority of 151.

If the conservative opposition poses no immediate threat, however, a much more fundamental challenge arises from the incongruity of the progressive's

**The progressive's  
ideology is  
incongruous with  
the realities of  
today's South Korea.**

ideology with the realities of today's South Korea. South Korea's economic base is becoming increasingly globalized and market oriented, boasting one of the most consumer-oriented economies in East Asia thanks to the easy credit made available during the Kim Dae-jung administration's reforms. Many chaebols that survived the IMF crisis and successfully adapted to the global marketplace have become the mainstay of South Korea's increasing economic clout and prestige in the global mar-

ket. The economy is becoming ever more tightly woven into the global capitalist system as South Korea continues to expand its market, having reached free-trade agreements with Chile and Singapore and continuing to seek others, even with its former colonial master, Japan.

South Korea's high-technology savvy and globalized younger generation that grew up amid plenty is far more individualistic and liberal than the 386 Generation. The radical student organizations that attracted large numbers in the 1980s are fading from the scene. Despite this new generation's apparent support for Roh and the Uri party, it is too early to discern how they will eventually come to view the country's recent history as well as the leftist-nationalist interpretations of these events. Thus, the progressives are governing a South Korea that is becoming increasingly liberal, free-market oriented, and globalized, with little in their ideology or past experience to guide them. How then are the progressives able to maintain their influence?

### **POLITICAL SMOKE AND MIRRORS**

The progressives were able to enter the political mainstream because they were willing to make a pact with the devil by making strategic alignments with the conservatives. Kim Dae-jung was able to win the presidency not only because of the IMF crisis that hit South Korea in 1997, but also because he merged his political party with that of Kim Jong-pil, the mastermind behind Park's coup of 1961 and the founding director of the KCIA, the very agency that abducted and almost killed Kim Dae-jung in 1971. Kim

Jong-pil, the arch-conservative, defected to Kim Dae-jung's camp because he could not secure the presidential candidacy of the conservative New Korea Party, then led by President Kim Young-sam. Kim Jong-pil and Kim Dae-jung made a pact based on the promise that the latter, once elected president, would push through a constitutional amendment to turn South Korea's political structure into a parliamentary system. Kim Jong-pil would then become prime minister and wield the real power while Kim Dae-jung would serve as the largely ceremonial president. Kim Dae-jung did not keep this promise, and Kim Jong-pil broke from him in 2000.

Two years later, Roh also made a pact with conservative politician, Chung Mong-jun, an independent who rose to national prominence as the chief organizer of the 2002 World Cup, to win his presidency. Chung, the owner of Hyundai Heavy Industries and the son of the founder of Hyundai, one of Korea's foremost chaebols, sided with Roh until the night before election day, when he dropped his support, thinking that Roh would lose the election. To Chung's surprise and everlasting regret, Roh won the election, free of any obligation to him. Regardless, Roh clearly was willing to compromise with conservatism to secure the presidency.

The progressives have successfully used political rhetoric and ideology to manipulate the selective affinity, or confusion, between progressivism and liberalism to its advantage. Domestically, the continuing legacy of the overbearing state, authoritarianism, and regimentation of all aspects of life under the old regime continues to make any call for radical reform and dismantling of the old system attractive to many, especially among the younger generation. From outside the country, liberals and free-marketers with little understanding of South Korea's domestic political history and dynamics continue to support the progressives' liberal agenda.

### **THE LIMITS OF LEFTIST NATIONALISM**

An even more important factor in the progressives' ability to maintain their appeal has been nationalism. As South Koreans become increasingly successful, they are also becoming more vociferous in expressing their national pride. The massive rallies during the national soccer team's World Cup victories in the summer of 2002, for example, became occasions for South Koreans from all walks of life to celebrate the nation's coming of age. When the news spread in the fall of 2002 that two schoolgirls had been killed during U.S. troop maneuvers, however, those same people came out to mourn the deaths and to protest the insensitive manner in which the United States handled the case. Then, led by the progressives, these rallies were transformed into anti-American rallies. The leftist nationalists had appropriated a nationalism based on justifiable pride in the nation's successes in achieving

industrialization and democratization (as well as winning soccer matches) and transformed it into anti-American sentiment.

Many South Koreans, regardless of their ideological orientation, had by this time become critical of certain aspects of the U.S. presence in their land, such as perceived arrogance and misbehavior on the part of U.S. troops

or unequal clauses contained in the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which went into effect in July 1966. Many now want to see U.S. bases removed from what has become the choicest piece of real estate in the middle of Seoul. Such sentiments play into leftist nationalists' hands. More limited demands to remove U.S. bases from Seoul and to amend the SOFA agreement are conflated with broader calls to remove U.S. forces from South Korea and to condemn U.S. imperialism.

**The challenge for the progressives is to overcome their infantile leftist nationalism.**

Another way in which the progressives have managed to dominate the political agenda is by initiating a national debate on history. By applying a crude nationalistic standard to the often troubling and complex legacy of the Japanese colonial period, the progressives have managed to brand anyone who had worked in almost any capacity under the Japanese rule as a "collaborator." This includes not only those Koreans who worked for the colonial bureaucracy, police, and the military, but also industrialists, intellectuals, artists, and composers. Among them, the most prominent is the late president Park, who was a military officer in the Japanese imperial army before liberation and the father of Park Keun-hye, the current leader of the opposition. By opening the debate on colonial history, the progressives are trying to undercut the legitimacy of past regimes as well as the opposition.

Roh's speech on August 15, 2004, on the occasion of the 59th Liberation Day made clear that the rectification of history would be high on the current government's political agenda:

Acts of betrayal in support of imperialist Japan and colonial rule at the same time our patriotic forefathers were staking their lives in the fight for the nation are still hidden in the shade of history.... What is more shameful is that the independence fighters who followed the right path of history and their descendants have been plagued by poverty and alienation and have been persecuted by those who curried favor with imperialist Japan and subsequently became social leaders.

Moreover, Roh declared that an equally serious crime was "the encroachment on human rights and the illegal acts perpetrated by past administra-

tions.” The president then proposed forming an “ad hoc parliamentary committee to deal comprehensively with matters that have become contentious throughout history.”<sup>8</sup>

The issue of pro-Japanese collaborators (*ch'in-il p'a*) is an emotional one for Koreans. Human rights violations during the authoritarian years is also a painful scar on the Korean psyche. By seizing the emotional high ground through his nationalistic and pro-democracy rhetoric while elevating history as the main topic of political deliberation, Roh has succeeded in dominating and leading the political agenda. The government now aims to identify and punish those who collaborated with the Japanese during Korea's occupation from 1910 to 1945 and has initiated an investigation into wrongdoings by individuals and institutions during the authoritarian years. Most recently, the National Intelligence Service (formerly the KCIA) embarked on an internal inquiry into its own past misdeeds.<sup>9</sup> The conservatives contend that these moves are calculated to discredit and weaken the opposition. The government and the ruling coalition claim that their goal is a reconciliation with history that will ultimately lead to a national reconciliation. Needless to say, reconciliation seems to be the last thing that has been taking place.

The debate on history has led to a witch hunt, in which opposing sides try to dig up past misdeeds of their political opponents' parents and grandparents while the accused tries everything to defend the honor of his or her ancestors. Given that the colonial period ended some 60 years ago, few if any of the accused traitors and collaborators are alive, let alone active in politics. The debate has therefore created bizarre cases of prominent politicians' careers being ruined overnight when it is discovered that their parents actually worked for the Japanese colonial government rather than having been upstanding nationalists as they had been brought up to believe. This surreal debate has succeeded in turning every policy debate into one over family honor. Such debates rarely if ever produce compromises and also divert the attention and energy of the country away from addressing the pressing policy issues it faces.

## A House Divided and Damaged

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South Korea's deep division is based on radically different interpretations of the modern nation's birth and development. The conservatives, like much of the rest of the world, celebrate South Korea's industrialization and democratization despite the many compromises and shortcomings. The progressives, in contrast, are unrelenting in their criticism of the nation's history despite these achievements. For the progressives who turn a critical eye to history, South Korea reached its current state through too many com-

promises and unjustifiable sacrifices, including dictatorship, human rights violations, and dependence on foreign power. As such, they argue that South Korea's achievements cannot be considered genuine until the country has corrected past mistakes and wrongdoings and brought to justice all those implicated.

Just when South Korea was coming into its own, having built a vibrant industrial economy and democracy, it has now come to be governed by a coalition deeply suspicious of everything that made the country a success,

**P**olicymakers must understand the roots of the current ROK government's policies.

including its political system, economy, and alliance with the United States. The fallout from the resulting ideological war between the two South Koreas has been serious. The country is now deeply divided along class, generational, and regional lines. Its economy is suffering while its relationship with the United States is rapidly and perhaps irreparably deteriorating.

Currently, the South Korean economy is in a deep freeze. Domestic consumption and investment are the lowest in years, lower even than during the years immediately following the 1997 financial crisis. The government's economic policy continues to vacillate between an ideology that calls for redistributive justice and the pro-market, pro-business reforms and policies that would make South Korean firms more competitive and South Korea more attractive to foreign investors. South Korean companies, deeply suspicious of the ideological motivation of the ruling coalition and afraid of the political instability ensuing from the society's ideological division, are refusing to invest in the domestic economy. The only bright spot is the export sector, led by the likes of Samsung, LG, Hyundai, and POSCO.

In the international arena, South Korea today finds itself in a corner of the world surrounded by an increasingly powerful China, a confident Russia, and an unpredictable and nuclear-armed North Korea, as well as a recovering Japan jittery over North Korea and China. The North Korea that the progressives try so hard to accommodate and embrace is becoming more bellicose, flaunting all international norms with the self-professed aim of becoming a nuclear power, if it has not become one already. South Korea's accommodating stance toward North Korea is a serious burden on South Korea's economy, security, and relations with allies.

It is in this context that the United States has begun reducing its military presence in South Korea, ostensibly as part of its global strategy of military redeployment as well as out of the very real need for additional troops in Iraq.

The increasing U.S. focus on fighting international terrorism, rather than simply defending South Korea for Cold War–era reasons, would have made the justification of a continued close military alliance between the two countries difficult enough. The ambivalent attitude of South Korea’s ruling coalition regarding the U.S. troop presence has only given ammunition to those in the United States and South Korea who brashly advocate U.S. withdrawal.

## **The Challenges Ahead**

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The challenge for the progressives is to overcome their infantile leftist nationalism, which is wreaking havoc on South Korea’s economy and its alliance with the United States, the country’s two mainstays. What is needed is a pragmatic turn. If the progressives are to have any hope of achieving their oft-repeated goal of doubling the country’s per capita income by 2010, they need to formulate economic policies that can quickly put the country back on the path of rapid growth.

They also need to clarify their stance vis-à-vis North Korea. A clear distinction is necessary between national reconciliation based on economic and humanitarian exchanges, on one hand, and holding North Korea accountable to improve security and uphold international norms, on the other. As things currently stand, the tense standoff between the United States and North Korea is putting South Korea in a hopeless situation that satisfies neither ally nor brother. Moreover, the spectacle of the United Nations and the United States officially condemning North Korea’s human rights violations while South Korea’s government, led by a former human rights lawyer, remains silent in fear of offending the North, should come to an end. Sending troops to Iraq only after such a public and controversial debate that the United States and its allies feel more irritated than grateful is the kind of negative-sum game that the government needs to stop playing.

For those interested in maintaining close and constructive ties between South Korea and the United States, the challenge is to be able to make the sometimes fine distinction between the demands of the two South Koreas: one increasingly successful and proud and the other dogmatically nationalist and anti-American. To prevent further damage to the U.S.–South Korean alliance that could have serious consequences for the two countries as well as Northeast Asia as a whole, policymakers in each country and all others concerned must understand the roots of the current South Korean government’s policies toward North Korea and the United States, rather than glossing over the glaring anomalies and frictions in the name of a staunch alliance that is increasingly illusory. Obviously, South Korea will become increasingly self-confident, wanting to steer its own course in foreign policy, and South



Korea's relations with the United States will have to evolve to reflect this desire on the part of the Korean people while recognizing geopolitical realities. Accommodating such changes and reflecting such sentiments while maintaining the fundamentals of the close relationship formed over the years will be a tough act.

As of now, the conservatives show little sign of making a comeback. They are in disarray, divided along generational, regional, and even ideological lines. Thus, despite continuing troubles in the economy and with allies, the progressives maintain the political upper hand. Given the economic and geopolitical realities of South Korea, it may very well be that the progressives will ultimately make the transition to a more pragmatic position. It may be that only another economic or security crisis, however, can bring them around. Such a transition cannot come too soon. In the meantime, South Korea's economic as well as strategic position both regionally and globally will continue to erode.

## Notes

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