# KOREAN POLITICS AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

by Daryl M. Plunk

Recent domestic political tensions in the Republic of Korea (ROK--or South Korea) have prompted considerable American attention on the state of U.S.-ROK economic, political, and strategic relations. The challenge for the U.S. government is to translate South Korean political realities into effective U.S. foreign policy that serves both Korean and American national interests.

If ROK political tensions and the resulting domestic strife continue to worsen unchecked, vital U.S. economic and strategic interests could be endangered. Chief among the dangers is the possibility that communist North Korea may move to take advantage of instability in the South.

At the end of the Korean War in 1953, a ceasefire was signed by opposing military leaders, but a political settlement was never reached. Thus the two sides remain technically in a state of war. Today, the forces of the two Koreas plus the 40,000 U.S. soldiers still in South Korea mean that one million heavily armed troops stand combat ready in an area the size of Minnesota, making the Korean peninsula one of the world's perennial flash-points. And because the interests of the U.S., Japan, the Soviet Union, and China converge on the peninsula, stability there is vital to peace in the entire Northeast Asian region.

Alarmingly, it is likely that the threat of North Korean aggression is mounting because of what I call the "desperation factor": the North is growing increasingly concerned as Seoul outstrips its rival in economic performance and international recognition. The U.S. Department of Defense recently suggested that South Korea is "entering perhaps its most dangerous period in thirty years."

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In addition to the importance of the U.S.-ROK strategic alliance, South Korea is rapidly becoming a significant economic ally. Last year, U.S. trade with the ROK was larger than that with France and Italy, making South Korea the seventh largest U.S. trading partner. Thus, vital U.S. economic interests are at stake on the peninsula.

No one doubts that the formulation of U.S. policy toward South Korea warrants serious consideration. But there is a formidable obstacle to effective policy making: U.S. perceptions of the ROK are often characterized by widespread misperceptions. For instance, while South Korea has achieved remarkable economic growth and is rapidly moving toward developed nation status, Americans tend to think of the ROK as a nation whose economic and social infrastructure was nearly obliterated by the Korean War--the so-called "M.A.S.H. mentality." Recent polls have found that 80 percent of Americans believe South Korea still receives massive U.S. economic assistance when, in fact, it receives no outright aid. Physical distance and ethnic contrasts further complicate American attempts to understand its faraway ally. So, regarding South Korea, there are often significant gaps between U.S. perception and reality.

Viewing the current South Korean political scene through an American lens likewise presents problems. To get a handle on the political situation today, a brief historical overview might be helpful.

The ROK was born out of chaos. The surrender of Japan in August 1945 ended 35 years of harsh Japanese colonial rule over the Korean peninsula. Koreans were then faced with the tragic partition of their country and the challenge of self-government. In 1948, after three years of U.S. military rule, the ROK was established. However, having channeled most of their attention toward Japan, U.S. military officials had not initiated efforts toward systematic state building in South Korea. Unlike Japan, therefore, which had a democratic system of government imposed upon it, the ROK was left to fend for itself.

Although Syngman Rhee was elected president in 1948 under a democratic constitution, by the mid-1950s he was growing increasingly authoritarian. When Rhee blatantly rigged the presidential election of 1960, he was toppled by a student revolt. For the most part, Rhee failed to develop real democratization or even economic progress in the ROK.

Rhee was followed by a one-year experiment with a parliamentary form of government. However, the government of Chang Myon, which was plagued by factionalism, student activism, and economic deterioration, was overthrown by a military coup led by General Park Chung Hee in 1961. Park served as ROK president for most of the next two decades.

Korean history books will forever remember Park as the father of the ROK "economic miracle." But like Rhee, Park did little to foster

South Korea's political development. By the late 1970s, he had, by fiat, usurped virtually all political power. Social unrest in 1979 led to his assassination by one of his closest aides.

Park's death after nearly twenty years of one-man rule created an enormous political vacuum. The resultant bitter fighting among rival politicians together with the worst economic slump in sixteen years left the nation in chaos. Against this backdrop, the military led by General Chun Doo Hwan moved to restore order citing, among other things, the North Korean threat. A new constitution was endorsed in late 1980, and in early 1981, Chun was elected president.

While some today call for the "restoration of democracy" in South Korea, the fact is that Koreans have experienced precious little democracy. The ROK's history is dominated by authoritarianism and the politics of confrontation. South Korea has made some progress in political development under the Chun Administration. While Chun holds most of the power under the presidential system of government embodied in the current constitution, the political environment today represents a clear improvement over the politics of the Park era.

South Korea has never experienced a peaceful transfer of executive power. The current constitution calls for a single-term, seven-year presidency and stipulates that no amendment to this limitation may apply to the president in office at the time of the change. Thus, the hallmark of Chun's Administration is its pledge to end the perpetuation of rule by a single individual.

While Chun keeps a tight grip on the broadcast media and political activity in general, the trend has been toward slow and gradual liberalization. The opposition New Korea Democratic Party (NKDP) led by the "two Kims," Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, is a case in point. In National Assembly elections early last year, the NKDP emerged as the largest and most outspoken opposition bloc in the legislature precisely because the ROK government has eased political restrictions. Today, the NKDP regularly sponsors anti-government rallies where Chun is loudly denounced as a "dictator," something that was virtually not ever heard in the last fifteen years of ROK politics.

The next national election is set for 1987, and the transfer of power is scheduled to take place in early 1988. Last year, the NKDP chose as its prime political target the electoral college system established in the current constitution, charging that it can be easily manipulated by the government. The opposition party has, therefore, called for a constitutional amendment that will allow direct election of the next president.

When the government refused even to discuss the issue of constitutional revision, the NKDP took to the streets in February of this year with rallies in major cities supporting a direct election

amendment, and various religious and social organizations dramatically announced their support for the NKDP's position. Then, on April 30, 1986, President Chun surprised nearly everyone by declaring that he would support any constitutional change endorsed in the National Assembly and that, in the event of a political agreement, the next election could take place under a new constitution. While some question his real intentions, Chun's announcement represented a 180-degree shift in the government's position.

The key point here is that the Chun government has shown its willingness to respond to public pressure, a characteristic not exactly common in the ROK's political history. And in all likelihood, the concessions made by Chun are irreversible. In the summer of 1988, the entire world will turn its attention to South Korea as it hosts the Seoul Olympic Games, and both the government and the opposition agree that constitutional reform and the transfer of power must be completed well before the opening ceremonies of the Games. The Chun Administration, which rightfully claims credit for winning the Olympic bid and is pumping enormous energy and resources into planning and preparation, is well aware that a government crackdown and the resulting political crisis would spell disaster for the Seoul Olympics and seriously damage the ROK's international image.

There are encouraging indications that the opposing sides will reach a settlement and avoid a political disaster. A few weeks ago, in a move designed to channel the heated debate over constitutional reform into the ROK legislature, the National Assembly Special Constitutional Revision Committee was inaugurated.

The rapid-fire series of political developments over the last year has moved one fundamental issue to center stage: which system of government best suits the Korean people? The ruling Democratic Justice Party supports a parliamentary system with a strong prime minister chosen by members of the National Assembly, while the opposition NKDP calls for a presidential system embracing a direct popular election. The battle lines have been drawn, and each side is publicizing its position through a variety of public forums. Ideally, political leaders hope for an agreement in the National Assembly late this year and a popular referendum early next year, setting the stage for the national elections scheduled for late 1987.

The situation is still quite fluid, and no one is predicting the eventual outcome with any confidence. What is significant, in my view, is that both the government and the opposition are being extremely cautious and moderate. Both sides are subdued by the magnitude of what is at stake. A serious political upheaval in Korea would undoubtedly inflict enormous damage on Korea's economic performance, its international image, and the sponsorship of the Olympic Games. This means that Korean politicians are under popular pressure to reach a settlement that will establish a stable and

responsive system of government befitting an industrializing nation of Korea's stature.

Earlier this year, some Americans were so inspired by the fall of President Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines that they set their sights on Korea and called on the U.S. government to press the Chun Administration for "democratization." But Korea is not a mismanaged nation teetering on the edge of revolution. In fact, the differences between the ROK and the Philippines are far more numerous than the similarities. Fortunately, most U.S. policy makers have accepted this, leading to a bipartisan consensus that the current clash over constitutional reform should be worked out by the Koreans themselves in an atmosphere free of direct U.S. intervention.

Unnecessary U.S. involvement could jeopardize a peaceful resolution because both sides might harden their positions in expectation of U.S. support. Washington's policy, therefore, should be to continue encouraging dialogue between the government and the opposition.

Rep. Stephen Solarz (D-NY), Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, points out that "American interests would best be served, and a political disaster in Korea avoided, by a compromise in which both the government and the opposition give up some of what they seek for the sake of progress and stability." And he is right. Korea's cultural heritage, however, has created some significant obstacles.

Heavily influenced by the Judeo-Christian heritage, democracy in the West evolved slowly over hundreds of years. Major philosophical battles were waged over the role of the church in statecraft, the "divine right" of rulers, and the scope of individual freedoms, with the result that today modern Western democracies have for the most part institutionalized the concept of fiduciary trust whereby political authority flows from the people.

The past 500 years or so of Korea's history could hardly provide a more stark contrast. Centuries of strong Confucian traditions and their inherent authoritarianism have indelibly marked contemporary ROK politics.

This is not to say that Korea is incapable of achieving democracy. But democracy will not spring up full blown in Korea as a result of government or opposition decree. As important as the outcome of the ongoing constitutional debate is the negotiation process itself. For democracy is not simply a political system spelled out in a detailed constitution. It is, rather, a process that allows citizens fair choice of their leaders. It is also a state of mind that allows differing views to achieve consensus on important national issues. Therein lies democracy's real challenge for the ROK.

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