Foreign Policy in the First Two Years of the Roh Moo-hyun Government

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When President Roh Moo-hyun was elected in December 2002, South Korea's transition from authoritarianism and "crony capitalism" to full democracy and responsible medium-power status was in mid-stream. The beginning of 2005 marks the end of Roh's first two years in office and the beginning of the second major stage of his tenure. This paper examines the meaning of President Roh's first two years and what they may tell us about the next three in terms of responding to external realities and positioning South Korea to be a greater force in the region and the world.

■ Context of the RMH years

Roh Moo-hyun ran for office and was elected in an international climate very different from that of previous presidential contenders. Complex dynamics were at work in the elections of 1987, 1992 and 1997, including the waxing and waning threat from North Korea, the manipulation of the North Korean threat by South Korea's government and ruling party, the needs of U.S. administrations to balance strong deterrent against the North and public support for democratic reforms, and lingering "Cold War" world views in Seoul, Washington and elsewhere.

Since the end of the Korean War leaders in the South have been judged on their competence and legitimacy partly by their relationships with U.S. counterparts. The reasons for this are obvious if not always comfortable for either party.

U.S. President Ronald Regan came to office after a very tense period between President Carter and President Chun Doo-hwan over human rights and democracy questions. President Regan engaged with Chun, inviting him to the White House in return for sparing the life of Kim Dae-jung (according to some accounts), but was criticized for doing so.

President Clinton's administration experienced great frustration with Kim Yong-sam, due to his use of the North Korean threat to generate votes at election time and his generally "hot and cold" tactics toward the North.

With Kim Dae-jung's election in 1998 a new kind of relationship became possible between the South Korean and American presidents. The Korean system had passed one of the most critical tests of fairness and openness, and the President now enjoyed a degree of legitimacy unprecedented in the modern era. While most comment at the time focused on the personal qualities of Kim Dae-jung and the historic importance of passing power from one party to the other, a larger change was occurring in the evolution of the Korean presidency. There was also palpable relief among some in the U.S. administration at the prospect of having a partner in Korea who was more consistent in policy and more sympathetic toward the U.S. strategy for North Korea.

In 2001, as the freeze on U.S. engagement with North Korea turned into a full reversal of the Clinton/ Kim engagement approach, former NSC Senior Director for Asia Ken Liberthal observed that the U.S.-Korea relationship in the years 1999 and 2000 was highly unusual. He noted that a number of critically important "stars" came into alignment in those years, and provided the basis for the breakthroughs that were accomplished, including the DPRK moratorium on missile development, the North-South summit and the unprecedented U.S.-North Korean diplomatic exchanges. These unusual conditions included economic malaise in North Korea, which prompted the DPRK leadership to explore trading WMD capabilities for security, aid and development; the persistent drive by the ROK government for a new, peaceful basis for North-South relations; and the U.S. willingness to trust the leadership of the ROK government regarding strategy toward North Korea. William Perry's October 1999 report advocated accelerated engagement including WMD disarmament tied to political coexistence and backed by a "plan B" of enhanced, stringent containment. Liberthal predicted in early 2001 that conditions had changed radically with the inauguration of the Bush administration, and were unlikely to support progress toward a rollback of the DPRK threat any time soon.

The impact in Korea from the close U.S.-Korea working relationship was not fully appreciated until that relationship began to come undone in March 2001, at the time of Kim Dae-jung's visit to Washington. Despite extensive second-guessing since then from observers and critics, there is very little likelihood that Kim ever had the possibility for

a continuation of the close and mutually respectful relationship of the previous years. The incoming U.S. administration's senior policymakers were said to be committed to the destruction of the Agreed Framework and a posture of open hostility toward the North Korean regime. Of the four major pillars of the U.S.-ROK alliance, three have remained stable through aggressive management and a general alignment of strategic views: the economic, cultural and security pillars. The fourth pillar, the political relationship, was effectively severed in the Spring of 2001.

The dynamics set in motion in March 2001 would have major consequences for South Korean policy and policy making, and set the stage for the election of Roh Moo-hyun. Among the political losses at that time were the sense of shared strategic view of the North Korea threat, the U.S. assessment of the value and trustworthiness of South Korea as an ally in the region, and the U.S. view of Korean reunification as among the organizing principles of its East Asian vision. Two themes also served to intensify the perception of a link between U.S. policy and ROK politics: the open and unusual embrace of Grand National Party presidential candidate Lee Hoi-chang by senior U.S. officials during his visit to Washington just weeks before the election, and the adoption (often "wholesale") by Bush administration officials of the most poisonous and alarming critique of Roh Moo-hyun offered by his political opponents. Although the tragic death of two Korean schoolgirls in June 2002 is seen as an alliance-changing event, it probably gave voice to perceptions and emotions that had been brewing for a long time. It is difficult but important to try to distinguish between the long-simmering structural tensions and resentments that tugged at alliance cohesion during the whole decade of the 1990s on the one hand, and those that arose principally in reaction to perceptions and policies in Washington and Seoul on the other. A strong case can be made that the environment among much of the South Korean public, particularly the young, changed fundamentally with the policies and statements of the Bush government.

Roh Moo-hyun's own statements as a candidate could often be read as provocative toward the U.S. administration. His central theme, however, was both logical and uncontroversial in nature: that there needed to be a restoration of mutual respect, consultation and realignment of strategic view if there was going to be any chance for policy cohesion.

Roh Moo-hyun was elected in the context of a radical reversal of U.S. policy toward both North and South Korea, and his ability to manage the two central foreign responsibilities of the Korean presidency, North Korea and the United States, were severely constrained by that context.

■ Major policy decisions: U.S. forces

At the time of his inauguration, President Roh was already faced with a "policy crisis" brought about by U.S. announcements of a rapid reconfiguration of U.S. forces in Korea, including the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the DMZ to bases south of the Han River. Regardless of the intent of these announcements, their impact on the new government was severe. Experienced Korean diplomats and scholars were increasingly alarmed that the old paradigm for the alliance was weakening, and they openly lamented the perception that the U.S. commitment to Korea was lessening. At the same time, some in the new government quickly accepted the prospect of a restructured and reduced American presence, since it fit well with some of the longstanding desires for "more independence" from the United States.

The fact that the reconfiguration and reductions had long been discussed and that they did not reduce, and would likely enhance the combined deterrent capability, were lost on most Korean observers. Inside the Roh government, the prospect for growing independence from the U.S. was becoming a reality more quickly than expected. For the most part, the government accelerated its consultations with the U.S. and successfully managed this still-ongoing transition.

More difficult was the perception from the changes in U.S. forces and the newly coercive U.S. policy toward North Korea that the mission of the USFK had changed, and leaders in both Soul and Washington were unprepared for the new perception. To some South Koreans, the policy changes coming from the U.S. transformed the image of the USFK from that of an inconvenient but welcome necessity for preventing conflict to that of a potential tool for initiating preemptive conflict with North Korea. This is one explanation for the alarming reports that the public had begun to fear the U.S. more than North Korea. The Roh administration shared these concerns about U.S. policy, and continued to argue in meetings that the U.S. posture toward the North was unsustainable.

Internal Korean confusion over the government's foreign policy grew during 2003 and 2004. Prominent conservatives, both inside the GNP party and in the press, sometimes displayed almost equal frustration with the North Korean, South Korean and American governments. The growing perception of a U.S. disinterest in the alliance was unavoidable and troubling. Great effort was made to blame the Roh administration for frictions between the U.S. and ROK governments, but there were also regular pleas to the U.S. side to pay more attention to Korean strategic concerns.

■ South Korean troops to Iraq

Probably the most important and effective decision by the Roh government during the past two years was the response to the U.S. request for troops in post-Saddam Iraq. As with other U.S. allies and in particular Britain, the Iraq War was unpopular among the Korean public. The political and policy classes were also hotly divided over the appropriate Korean response. Most of the older and more experienced officials and observers counseled to contribute troops; most of the younger and newer officials urged resistance. The result was several months of delay, and an embarrassing search for the safest location for the Korean force to occupy in Iraq.
The environment of government-to-government political and policy tension made the decision more difficult. Nevertheless, on February 13, 2004 the National Assembly voted overwhelmingly to send 3,000 troops to assist in reconstruction. The period between the Assembly vote and the actual dispatch in August 2004 was filled with extensive public debate and political controversy. The President was impeached in March and reinstated in May, a Korean citizen was kidnapped and murdered in Iraq, and the revelations about prisoner mistreatment by U.S. forces at the Abu Grab prison served to complicate the government's decision.

Nevertheless, the decision was made with remarkable transparency. While establishment or experienced diplomats and other observers argued that the offer of troops by Korea must be based solely on the broader Korean national interest and its desire to support its closest ally, others openly advocated a link between this offer and the U.S. policy toward North Korea. The President himself affirmed this link in several statements, although it was never official government policy on either side to link the two. In doing so he reaffirmed the impression that he is pragmatic and willing to defy convention. It is only through such transparent efforts at protecting the Korean interest that the president has retained significant public support for his policy direction, even

when his personal popularity has ebbed and flowed.

In a practical sense, the decision to dispatch a significant number of troops to support the U.S. effort in Iraq has done much of what the Roh administration had hoped. It purchased an important measure of "political peace" between the two governments. For the first time since Roh Moo-hyun's inauguration, a majority of U.S. press reports were positive about the South Korean contribution to the U.S.-Korea alliance. The degree to which the U.S. side agreed to accept South Korean ideas for its proposal during the third round of Six Party Talks (6PT) in June 2004 may have been influenced by the South Korean commitment. Although there remained sustained criticism in Washington of South Korea's posture toward the North throughout 2004, one can imagine a far more critical and even dismissive attitude among U.S. specialists and officials if the Roh administration had refused the U.S. request.

■ Managing the U.S. relationship

The fundamental disagreement over approaches to North Korea has been rooted in different views of the Kim Jong-il regime. The U.S. under President Bush does not seem willing to accept the continuation of this regime. If it cannot accomplish Kim's defeat, then the posture is one of aggressive containment. Both the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments have found it impossible to join in this position, and therefore the North Korea question has become the central focus of the alliance to an even greater degree than under President Clinton. Roh Moo-hyun has been presented with an insolvable dilemma: he is expected to maintain coordination with the United States on goals and strategy toward North Korea; but he is also expected to diffuse tension and prevent any military action on the peninsula. Tension can be viewed as an asset in the U.S. drive to push North Korea to disarm. But it is viewed as very much against the ROK economic interest, so the time frame for North Korea policy has been important, and a source of disagreement with the U.S. During 2003 and 2004, the President's options appeared to be limited to managing the North Korean and U.S. relationships to avoid negative consequences.

As noted above, the Roh administration began work under a cloud of suspicion from many in the Bush administration and among policy specialists, who worried that his approach to North Korea would continue the "Sunshine" approach of his predecessor. U.S. officials also believed that in the post-9/11 atmosphere a regime such as Kim

Jong-il's was even less acceptable than before. Most governments in Asia, however, as well as most experienced observers, saw no practical alternative to buying out the North Korean threat through carefully constructed and verified deals. The non-U.S. parties to the 6PT all favored a more engaged and flexible U.S. position, which would accept the continuation of the Kim regime in North Korea in return for WMD disarmament and increased international engagement. During the three rounds of 6PT, the impression grew that the forum had the effect of isolating not North Korea, but the United States.

For the Roh government, the option of agreeing with the U.S. position and using its modest leverage to attempt an isolation/containment strategy was never viable. Senior officials most likely calculated that they would lose what leverage over the North they have; make it unlikely that they could be viewed again by the North as a "somewhat independent" actor; vastly increase the economically devastating (in the ROK) tension on the peninsula; increase the chance for violence in the U.S.-DPRK standoff; lose the possibility for occupying the "driver's seat" they covet; and fail utterly to capture the North Korean nuclear programs.

The great dilemma for President Roh and his team has been to manage a very volatile situation until either the parties create a break-through allowing serious deal-making toward disarmament, or other conditions improve. In this context it was not surprising that the Blue House was widely perceived to be hoping fervently for the election of John Kerry as U.S. president in November.

The Roh administration's reaction to George Bush's reelection was remarkably quick and decisive, and it indicated that several of the ongoing debates within the Blue House would not paralyze policy. Judging from the President's speech in Los Angeles less than two weeks after the U.S. election and subsequent speeches in Europe, there was early recognition that the second Bush administration would probably not be more flexible in its North Korea posture or align itself more closely with the South Korean position. Following this trend forward to predict the dynamics for the next three years of his term in office, the Korean president appeared to want to make a newly clear statement of his country's fundamental interests. Through various formulations, the Roh government position amounted to "No nukes, no war, no collapse." This position left room for only "containment minus," which would presumably include cooperation with the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and other anti-proliferation efforts, together

with active, multi-sector engagement, and "negotiated deal."

■ The North Korea relationship

The Roh government pushed ahead with various engagement initiatives with the North despite political controversy at home and continuing opposition from its U.S. ally. That opposition was somewhat muted by the dispatch of Korean troops to Iraq, but it continued throughout 2004. The Gaeseong Industrial Complex (GIC) was the most visible manifestation of the "Policy of Peace and Prosperity" declared by the new Roh government at the beginning of 2003. Together with rail links, tourism development, humanitarian aid and regular official meetings it signified a rare degree of continuity in policy toward North Korea. The value of this ten-year continuity for the evolution of the political system in the South cannot be overstated.

There were dangers for the ROK government in pushing ahead with engagement while the U.S. was moving in the opposite direction. Among these was the possibility that the South would begin to "care more" about improved North-South relations than the North did. Such a perception is strategically debilitating for the South, and it reduces the South's already modest leverage over the DPRK regime's policies. At times this perception has taken root among observers, and many of them question the wisdom of continued, aggressive engagement because of that. The reluctance to establish "walking away" points with the North, tied to particularly provocative actions or to delays or refusals to follow through on North-South projects, has also undercut the ROK leverage. It may be that Roh administration officials felt they must offset the isolation the North perceives from the 6PT process, but the frustration over the pace and sincerity of the North's engagement must have provoked debate within the Blue House over the proper mix of incentives.

On relations with both North Korea and U.S., the Roh government has sometimes suffered from a degree of "message confusion." Some of this involves the competing pressures being brought to bear on the ROK. But in the current era it is increasingly impossible to project different messages to different audiences, and to keep such differences separate. This problem plagued the Kim Dae-jung government in its approach to North Korea, and created great confusion in Washington. That confusion still existed throughout 2003, and it grew during 2004, partly because the ROK administration has struggled to make its position and its strategic vision clear. Former

foreign minister Yoon, Young-kwan, in his farewell address in January 2004, twice mentioned the lack of "clarity" in ROK policy as a simmering problem, and he may have been correct on that point. As noted above, the speeches since the election of George Bush to a second term seemed to signal a newly confident understanding of the Korean position. There is no substitute for internal policy cohesion and message coordination in the Roh government. If the President hopes to continue to manage foreign policy so that the Korean position is not only preserved, but strengthened, then renewed efforts in these areas will be required.

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