

**2002 VS. 2006, THE RISE AND FALL OF ANTI-AMERICANISM IN
SOUTH KOREA:
“IT’S KOREAN POLITICS (NOT U.S.), MR. PRESIDENT!”**

by

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President Bush: “I agree with the [South Korean] President that the issue [transfer of Operation Control] should not become a political issue.” (Comment at press backgrounder after ROK-U.S. Summit meeting at the White House on September 14, 2006.)

Senator Hilary Rodham Clinton: “Historical amnesia” among South Koreans about the important role the United States has played in supporting the country’s development is putting a strain on their longstanding military alliance.” (Comment at the Senate Armed Services Committee confirmation hearing for a new commander of U.S. Forces Korea on October 25, 2005.)

President Bush is not alone in his concern that crucial issues between the Republic of Korea and United States could become highly politicized in South Korean society, in particular, amid the upcoming presidential election in late 2007. Many people in Washington and Seoul share the president’s worry about the collateral damage that the politicization of a ROK-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and transfer of Operation Control might incur for the U.S. and the ROK, her once loyal ally.

Such apprehension is premised upon two observations. First, South Korea is now a highly divided society between pro-American conservatives and anti-American liberals. Second, societal division in this new Korea strongly influences and even constrains South Korean foreign policy. President Bush is right as well as wrong. It is true that South Korean society now faces a painful, deep division in foreign policy issues, which has replaced the old ‘manufactured consent’ among the public. Yet, it is South Korean domestic politics, not the United States, that mobilizes, accommodates, or contains the latent anti-Americanism—a key dimension of foreign policy conflicts.

Divided but Dynamic South Korea

Recent polls in South Korea would not only relieve but also confuse President Bush and many Washingtonians. In July 2006, about half of respondents (48.8 percent)

revealed they prefer a stronger ROK-U.S. alliance with regard to the future relationship between the ROK and the United States. In contrast, only about one fourth (28.9 percent) believed South Korea has to sustain an assertive, nationalistic policy toward the U.S.¹ Such results represent more than a one-time snapshot of public attitude since this pro-American view has increased gradually among the public since 2003. This resurgence of a pro-American view reflects a sea change from the tumultuous rise of anti-Americanism which peaked at the candlelight vigils for two schoolgirls killed by a U.S. military vehicle in 2002. What happened between 2002 and 2006 and what has occurred to change the angry, assertive, and anti-American young generation?

The rise and fall of anti-Americanism has largely to do with domestic politics as well as U.S. policies toward her ally. Specifically, the sudden rise of anti-Americanism in 2002 was coupled with the South Korean war of identity between liberals and conservatives. Foreign policy conflict is not necessarily between pro-Americans and anti-Americans. Foreign policy division is grounded in an overarching, structural conflict—that is, competing conceptions of South Koreans' identity between ethnic Korean people and citizens in a democratic, market economy. Ethnic Koreans view North Korea as a 'brother in troubles' rather than a failed socialist regime. They are keen to the problems of, rather than benefits of, Washington-led globalization. In contrast, democratic citizens want to extend democracy and a market economy to North Korea. For prosperity and peace, they favor close cooperation with the United States—the predominant power in the global economy, culture, and security. Anti-Americanism is only an attribute of the war of identity, as Koreans faced an identity crisis due to South Korean democratization, the Sunshine policy, and a changing U.S. posture after 9-11.

In 2002, it was the failure of Korean conservatives that allowed the rise of anti-Americanism. While conservatives, the main supporters for a close ROK-U.S. alliance in the past, led the economic miracle during the 1970s and the 1980s, they failed to stay in touch with the changing value priorities of the society after the democratic transition in 1987. The public, in particular, the young generation, has come to favor libertarian values, which reject a hierarchical authority structure in government, the family, workplaces and every corner of social life. They put great emphasis on values like decentralization, participatory democracy, and the rights of minorities. In contrast, the conservative political party is seen as tantamount to economic efficiency, pro-America, and hierarchical social order. Such changes resulted from democratic opening, sustained economic prosperity, and the increasing gap between the South and North Korean economies.

It was liberal politicians who led the rise of the anti-establishment, pro-libertarian revolution. In the wake of the cultural revolt, the dominant presence of the United States

on the Korean economy, security and mass culture would become an easy and salient target. The liberal party effectively discredited conservatives by denouncing Korea's close relationship with the United States, the 'developmental state' model of economic development, and the hierarchical social order as backbones of an authoritarian, conservative Korea. The election of President Roh Moo Hyun in 2002 spelled a crucial victory of liberals who orchestrated as well as politically cashed in on an anti-establishment movement. The young generation gave enthusiastic support to Roh Moo Hyun, an anti-establishment icon, who rose from a humble background to become a prominent human rights lawyer. They were gripped by Roh Moo Hyun's bold anti-American rhetoric during the 2002 campaign; here was someone who could "say no to the United States."

Similar to its sudden rise in 2002, anti-Americanism has waned abruptly. It is the governing failure of the anti-establishment, liberal government that is responsible for waning anti-Americanism. The approval rate for President Roh's performance slipped, as of November 2006, to as low as a single digit figure. The crisis of liberal government has been dire, not just in economic management and security issues but also in managing the working relationship among the president, his own party and the National Assembly. The overwhelming majority believes the liberal government has failed to sustain economic vibrancy and manage peace and security on the Korean peninsula. They hold that President Roh did an appalling job in running the government effectively.

In this vein, the majority of the people (54.4 percent), including the young generation, view a 'strategy for economic growth' as the most salient issue for the coming presidential election in 2007.ⁱⁱ Along with the aggravating threat to national security after the North Korean nuclear test in October 2006, the governing failure of liberals has helped to keep anti-Americanism at bay during these years. As the liberal government lost credibility among the public, it has been difficult for them to mobilize latent anti-Americanism into a political wave. Recently, anti-ROK-U.S. FTA demonstrations mobilized only hundreds, or perhaps a few thousand, of hard-core anti-American activists—not the widespread participation among the public that was expected. Also, it is a hard sell for liberals to interpret a North Korean nuclear test as a result of Bush administration's policy failure. In a nutshell, it is politics between liberals and conservatives that shapes the rise and fall of anti-Americanism.

Another Huddle for Anti-Americanism: From Social Division to Foreign Policy

President Bush's concern stems from the notion that the conflict between nationalistic liberals and pro-globalization conservatives will shape the foreign policies of

South Korea. His worry is justified given that democratic pressure on the South Korean foreign policy-making process has increased in recent years. It is evident that the foreign policy-making process has shifted from a 'presidential secret garden' to a 'democratic square.' The president no longer enjoys immense insularity, autonomy and secrecy although he still remains the most dominant actor in foreign policy making. The president is now under pressure from the public, NGOs, interest groups, and even from his own party. On the one hand, various actors like NGOs, interest groups and the National Assembly no longer tolerate presidential dominance in foreign policy making. On the other hand, the old 'manufactured consent' on security and foreign policy issues broke down with the rise of a divided society in the democratic era.

Then, how and why is a social division, for instance, between anti-Americans and pro-Americans, translated into foreign policy decisions? When does an anti-American issue "become a political issue" and shape a presidential decision? First, the amount of political capital of the president, the ultimate foreign policy decision maker, is critical. The fewer political resources a president has, the greater the likelihood that the president will be vulnerable to democratic pressure. For instance, when President Roh commanded a high level of political capital during his first year in office, he managed to cooperate with the Bush administration by sending 3,000 South Korean troops to Iraq against the sharply divided public opinion and fierce opposition from liberal NGOs in late 2003.

Second, electoral politics, in particular, centrifugal competition, has to do with politicization of foreign policy conflicts. Foreign policy conflict has taken the center stage in electoral competition, replacing the social and economic issues of the 2002 presidential election. The rise of a 'foreign policy election' results from the distribution structure of public attitudes. Polls have repeatedly shown that the public is more sharply divided on foreign policy issues than on social and economic issues. Liberal voters and conservative voters have shown more ideological distance with regard to the North Korean human rights issue and the transfer of operation control from the CFC to the Korean military than on issues like pension reform and education reform. As a result, electoral competition has become a centrifugal contest between liberal and conservative parties when foreign policy issues dominate an electoral campaign.

From Memory to Future, From Fear to Interests

Senator Clinton is right in pointing out the adverse effect on the alliance of historical amnesia, even "rewriting history," by liberal politicians in South Korea. Yet, Clinton should recognize that the young generation in democratic Korea does not have a historical

memory of a poor, small and insecure Korea. They do not know much about the U.S. influence that helped shape the Korean road to a prosperous, democratic country. Whereas the Korean young generation should learn from the history of ROK-U.S. relations, American leaders need to move beyond the memory of the “good old days” when the United States and the ROK shared a common goal of containing communism and the United States played the role of the patron for a poor and dependent Korea.

Both Korean and American leaders should learn from recent rise and fall of anti-Americanism in Seoul to move from retrospective remorse to prospective partnership. As the recent fluctuation showed, it is domestic politics between the Korean liberal and conservative parties that inflate or constrain latent anti-Americanism. In particular, the balance between Korea’s governing capacity and willingness to include public attitudes has to do with managing anti-Americanism, the voice of a large minority. The conservative party (GNP, Grand National Party), which lost the 2002 election amid the tide of rising anti-Americanism, is the current front-runner for the coming presidential election in late 2007. It should sustain a sound balance between governing capacity and inclusiveness in order to keep anti-Americanism at bay during the 2007 election campaign. While voters view the governing capacity of the GNP favorably, they are not highly comfortable with its inclusiveness. For instance, if a ROK-U.S. FTA negotiation is concluded without proper input from farmers and civic organizations and if the GNP endorses a negotiation outcome without this input, it runs the risk of instigating anti-Americanism among the public once again. That is, while the governing failure of the liberal government constrains anti-Americanism, the failure of inclusiveness on the part of the conservative party might arouse anti-Americanism.

American leaders should learn from the recent ebb and flow of anti-Americanism. The United States needs to be attentive to the aspirations and values of the new democratic Korea, beyond paying lip-service to South Korean achievements. The United States now faces dealing with a ‘grown up’ former client that yearns for a peaceful reunification and proper role as the tenth largest trading country on the globe. Even as the U.S. has been promoting democracy around the world, she also needs to adjust to deal with the success of democratization in South Korea. These efforts would help both South Korea and the United States move forward from memory to a future vision of partnership.

ⁱ East Asia Institute, “National Opinion on Views of International Relations”. July 2006.

ⁱⁱ Hangil Research, “National Opinion by Generations”. Nov. 9, 2006.