



South Korea: Its Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy Outlook

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Summary

South Korea's maturing democracy and rapid economic development have had a significant impact on its external relations, including the strategic and economic relationship with the United States. After decades of close strategic alignment with the United States under authoritarian governments, the past several democratically elected leaders in Seoul have sought their own brand of foreign policy and relations with the United States. Now the 13th largest global economy, South Korea is a major U.S. trade partner and host to some 37,000 forward deployed U.S. troops.

President Lee Myung-bak entered office in 2008 planning to upgrade ties with the United States and carry out other ambitious proposals, but faced multiple political challenges early in his administration. One initial crisis was the massive anti-government protests against the April 2008 U.S.-Korea beef deal. Lee's approval ratings fell to the 20%-30% level, although his ratings had returned to the 40-50% range in the early fall of 2009 due to improved economic forecasts. Many experts agree his political support remains fragile, including within his Grand National Party (GNP), which controls South Korea's unicameral National Assembly. Lee's clout may be limited by his early "lame duck" status; by law, South Korean presidents are limited to one, five-year term. The next presidential election is scheduled for 2012, the same year as the next nationwide National Assembly elections.

Although many argue that Lee's early problems were of his own making, South Korea's politically charged and fractious democratic system presents unique challenges for its leaders. Korean presidents operate under extremely intense media and voter scrutiny, and are occasional targets of activist groups that use the Internet to mobilize mass demonstrations like the 2008 beef protests. Civic demonstrations are a carryover from the pro-democracy movement that helped to end South Korea's authoritarian rule just two decades ago.

South Korea's increased self-assurance has raised aspirations for greater international clout and respect from the United States as a more equal alliance partner. Over the past decade, Washington and Seoul have taken a number of steps to recognize South Korea's rise. President Lee's vision of a "Global Korea" reflects even greater ambitions for a higher profile on the world stage, including a more assertive role in regional diplomacy. Lee has also shifted his predecessor's policy of unconditional engagement of North Korea to a "reciprocal" policy toward Pyongyang. This move has reoriented South Korean diplomacy away from pro-engagement China and closer to the U.S. and Japanese position on pressuring the regime to give up its nuclear weapons program.

Despite an upswing in South Korean attitudes toward the United States, several outstanding agenda items are affecting bilateral relations. These include relocating the U.S. Army base at Yongsan to Pyongtaek; transferring wartime operational control (OPCON) from U.S. to South Korean command; South Korea's contribution to allied efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan; and the pending bilateral KORUS Free Trade Agreement. Congress has a decisive role to play in approving appropriations for the base relocation plan and the ratification of the KORUS FTA.

Lee and President Obama nevertheless signed a "Joint Vision" statement during their bilateral summit in June 2009 that outlines a broad set of proposals for upgrading bilateral cooperation on global issues such as climate change and non-proliferation. But domestic political factors will likely set the parameters of Korea's efforts to become a greater stakeholder in the international community. A clearer understanding of these factors may help Congress and U.S. policymakers determine realistic goals for the U.S.-South Korean relationship over the mid to long term.

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Introduction¹

South Korea's shifting political landscape has had a significant impact in recent years on the nation's external relations, including its political and strategic relationship with the United States. Current South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, who belongs to the right-of-center Grand National Party (GNP), came to power in February 2008 pledging to boost domestic economic growth, improve alliance relations with the United States, and enhance South Korea's international status. A former business tycoon, Lee's promise of a "pragmatic," business-like approach to economic policy resonated with Korean voters hoping for more stable and sustained economic growth. Lee also promised to end the policy of unconditional engagement of North Korea practiced by his left-of-center predecessor, Roh Moo-hyun. The president has instead pursued a "reciprocal" relationship with the North Korean regime. But a series of political setbacks early in the Lee administration, including the contentious April 2008 agreement to lift a ban on most U.S. beef imports, have hampered momentum toward some of the president's key policy objectives, such as efforts to enhance the bilateral alliance with the United States. Although Lee's approval ratings have improved in recent months due to better-than-expected economic performance, his support rate is fragile and his plans for the bilateral alliance remain vulnerable to the polarized domestic political climate.

Many believe that Lee's problems stem in part from his own handling of issues, but they are also symptomatic of the complexities of the South Korean political culture and system. South Korea's emergence from an authoritarian state to a democracy—in just over two decades—has unleashed an outburst of participatory democracy that is marked by a burgeoning civil society, a generally free and highly critical mass media, a fluid political party system, and a sophisticated use of the Internet to galvanize and mobilize massive anti-government public demonstrations. After decades of authoritarian rule that ended in the late 1980s, South Korean leaders are now exposed to intense public scrutiny and are more dependent on public support to implement their policy agendas.

Yet for all its accomplishments, South Korea's democratic development is still considered by many to be a work in progress. The legislative branch of government, comprising the 299-member unicameral National Assembly, is structurally weak compared to the presidency and the central bureaucracy. Limited to a single, five-year term, Korean leaders nonetheless risk becoming lame-ducks soon after taking office. South Korean political parties form, disband, and merge regularly, in part because they tend to be regionally-based and centered around charismatic personalities rather than substantive issues. The fractious nature of the South Korean political system complicates policymaking in Seoul, particularly over politically-charged issues involving North Korea and the United States. Concerns about the current political system have spurred a growing movement in South Korea to revise the constitution in order to allow further structural and institutional improvements to the domestic political system. (For more on the current South Korean political system see the **Appendix**.)

All of these factors exist in the backdrop of South Korea's evolution from a developing, authoritarian state to the world's 13th-largest economy and rapidly maturing democracy—a

¹ The lead author of this report was Weston Konishi, who filled in as an Analyst in Asian Affairs for three months in 2009.

transition that has not yet reconciled traditional insecurities about South Korea's position vis-à-vis surrounding great powers and growing aspirations to become an advanced nation in its own right.² This tension has immediate consequences for South Korean foreign policy and relations with the United States, which has been South Korea's most important partner since helping to found the nation in 1948. At times resentful of U.S. influence, South Korean public attitudes toward the United States have been on an upswing of late amid ongoing bilateral efforts to work out sensitive alliance management issues. Lee's shift toward a conditional relationship with North Korea also has reshaped Seoul's regional diplomacy. In particular, the move has realigned South Korea with the United States and Japan in their attempt to pressure Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons program, while diverging somewhat from pro-engagement China. Public support for this approach, along with Lee's vision of a "Global Korea"³ and efforts to strengthen the bilateral U.S.-South Korea alliance, may be lost if the president fails to maintain his political standing until his term ends in February 2013.

President Lee's Political Standing

A year and a half into his five-year, single term presidency, President Lee has encountered multiple political challenges that have damaged his popularity throughout much of his administration. The president's early political troubles destroyed much of his political "honeymoon" period and made it difficult for him to navigate attacks from both his left and right flanks. This has hampered many of Lee's policy priorities, including the revitalization of alliance ties with the United States. One of the initial signs of trouble in the Lee administration was the massive anti-government protests that followed the April 2008 U.S.-Korea beef deal.⁴ The protests dropped Lee's approval ratings to the 20%-30% level, compared with the 49% of the vote the former mayor of Seoul and Hyundai businessman captured in the five-candidate presidential election on December 19, 2007. Many analysts believe that Lee also took a political hit as a result of the Lee government's initial response to external economic shocks, particularly the global financial crisis, which contributed to a slowdown in Korea's economic performance. Some polls indicate that Lee's approval ratings in the early fall of 2009 climbed back into the high 40% range, principally due to slightly improved economic forecasts for South Korea.

² According to a March 2008 *Chosun Ilbo* poll, a plurality of Koreans (43%) believe their nation will become an "advanced country" in six to ten years. See the Mansfield Foundation Asian Opinion Poll Database at <http://mansfieldfdn.org/polls/2008/poll-08-03.htm>.

³ The notion of a "Global Korea" is elucidated in *Global Korea: The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Korea*, Office of the President, June 2009. According to the report, Global Korea: "... refers to a Korea that leaves behind a habit of diplomacy narrowly geared to the Korean Peninsula, and adopts a more open and enterprising posture that sees the world stage as the appropriate platform for its foreign policy and national interest" (p.12).

⁴ For more on the beef issue see CRS Report RL34528, *U.S.-South Korea Beef Dispute: Agreement and Status*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted).

Analysis of the 2008 Beef Protesters

Initially, the protests that occurred in the days after the April beef deal were relatively small, led by middle and high school students, and reportedly focused almost solely on the beef agreement. As the deal came under more scrutiny, groups from across the political spectrum began arguing that it jeopardized Korean safety, with most of the attention focused on cows older than 30 months.⁵ By the beginning of June, the protests had expanded to include tens of thousands of Koreans. They also had developed into a broad condemnation against the then new government of President Lee Myung-bak. Following the announcement of the June 21 agreement, the size and intensity of the protests appeared to ebb somewhat, and some opinion polls revealed that a majority of Koreans felt the protests should end.⁶ While participants in the large-scale protests in early June appear to have come from a cross-section of South Korean society, according to South Korean police many of the main organizers hailed from the “progressive” side of the political spectrum. They tend to oppose the KORUS FTA, as well as much of Lee’s agenda, particularly his plans to deregulate the economy, reduce restrictions on South Korean conglomerates (the *chaebol*), and make relations with North Korea more reciprocal.⁷

The 2008 beef protests, which for weeks virtually paralyzed policy-making in Seoul, appear to have been fueled by a coalescing of several factors, including a perception that the beef deal symbolized Lee’s allegedly “arrogant” decision-making style; a feeling that the avowedly pro-American Lee was too willing to concede to the United States on an issue of public safety; increased angst over South Korea’s deteriorating economic situation, caused in part by rising inflation and global financial disruptions; and a desire by the main opposition party, the Democratic Party, to reverse electoral setbacks that had deprived its predecessor party of the presidency (in a December 2007 election) and control of the National Assembly (in April 2008 parliamentary elections). The beef agreement also tapped into many South Koreans’ widespread resentment of what they perceive to be an unequal relationship with the United States.

Although the protests dwindled considerably after the announcement of a renegotiated U.S.-South Korean deal on beef on June 21, 2008, they significantly eroded Lee’s ability to take political risks and promote his policy agenda at the very start of his administration. Throughout 2008 and much of 2009, Lee has had to back off many of the ambitious policy initiatives he either campaigned on or launched after assuming office, including a plan to link Seoul to Pusan by water by digging a “grand canal.” Perhaps most significantly for the United States, Lee’s weakened position has meant that he has had less political capital—let alone political will—to spend on measures to achieve his goal of upgrading the U.S.-South Korean alliance, including overcoming opposition to relocating U.S. bases in South Korea.

Lee’s Handling of the South Korean Economy

Lee’s signature campaign pledge—promoting economic growth—has been hurt, first by soaring energy prices in early 2008 and then by the global economic slowdown. Lee had touted a ten-year “747 target” of raising South Korea’s annual GDP growth to 7.0%, doubling its per capita income to \$40,000, and stepping from the world’s 13th largest economy to its seventh largest. However, South Korea’s economy has been buffeted by the global financial crisis. GDP growth plunged into negative territory in the last quarter of 2008 and unemployment rose to nearly 4% in May

5 Chosun Ilbo, “U.S. Beef from Cattle Older than 30 Months Should Not Be Allowed on Koreans’ Dining Tables,” June 14, 2008.

6 See, for instance, Hyun-kyung Kang, “President Plays Hardball As His Rating Goes Up,” *The Korea Times*, June 25, 2008.

7 OSC Report, “Four ROK Civic Groups Leading Anti-Government Beef Protests Profiled,” KPP20080605048001, June 5, 2008.

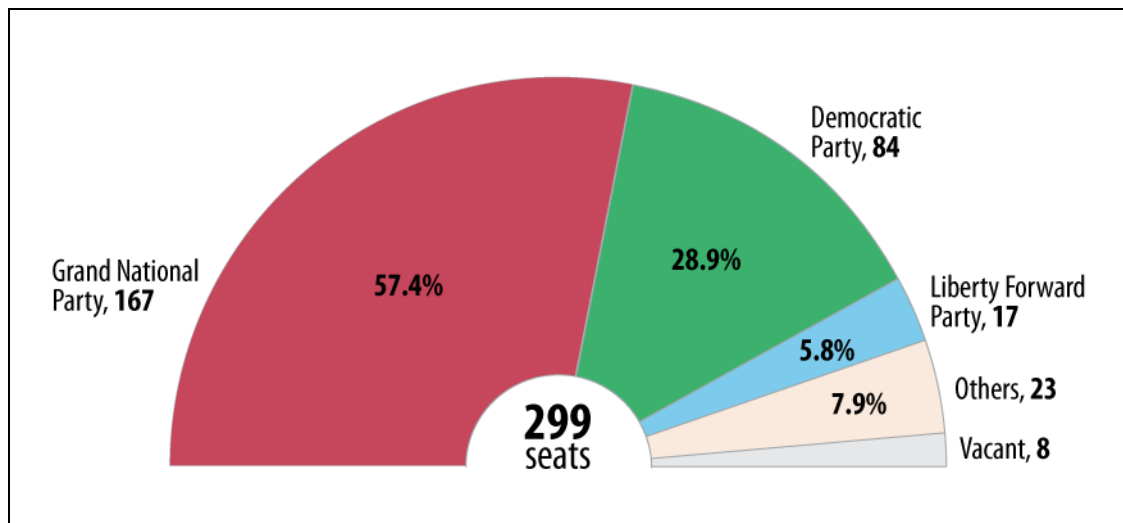
2009, considered high by Korean standards and nearly a percentage point increase since late 2008. Because South Korean banks—collectively among the industrialized world’s most leveraged—are heavily reliant upon foreign borrowing for their financing needs, the squeezing of international credit markets led to severe shortages of credit in South Korea in late 2008.⁸ South Korean trade with the outside world plummeted and the South Korean won plunged in value in the fall of 2008 and early 2009. In response to the economic dislocation, the Bank of Korea has reduced interest rates to a record low of 2% and the Lee government has unveiled a series of large-scale stimulus packages, negotiated a multi-billion dollar line of credit with the U.S. Federal Reserve, and fired his oft-criticized Finance Minister. Since the spring of 2009 there have been signs that the downturn in the Korean economy has bottomed out. Quarterly growth of 2.3% in the second quarter of 2009 suggests that South Korea’s economy may be contracting at a slower rate than anticipated, leading to forecasts of 2% real GDP growth for 2010.⁹ Improved economic prospects may account for a 10-percentage-point increase in Lee’s recent approval ratings, according to some polls.

Lee’s Conservative GNP Remains Divided

The South Korean president’s wavering popularity has not helped to unite his deeply divided party. Last year, his Grand National Party (GNP) merged with a smaller conservative group to increase its parliamentary majority in the unicameral National Assembly. Before the merger, the GNP had a razor-thin majority of 152 out of a total 292 seats following a worse-than-expected performance in parliamentary elections in April 2008. Coming less than two months after Lee’s inauguration, these results were widely interpreted as an early sign of Lee’s shaky political fortunes. The GNP currently has 167 seats in the National Assembly. (See **Figure 1** below.)

Figure 1. Party Strength in the National Assembly

As of September 23, 2009



Source: Figures courtesy of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea, Washington, D.C.

⁸ In October 2008, U.S. Federal Reserve and the Bank of Korea negotiated a \$30 billion currency swap to help South Korea overcome its shortage of U.S. dollars.

⁹ See “South Korea economy: Improving Prospects,” *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, August 12, 2009.

Notes: Last election held in April 2008; Next election to be held in April 2012.

However, the conservatives' numerical strength masks significant divisions and highlights Lee's weakened position. The merger brought into the GNP a faction loyal to Park Geun-hye, the popular daughter of Korea's former military ruler Park Chung-hee, whom Lee only narrowly defeated in the GNP's presidential primary in 2007. Lee had tried to marginalize Park's influence, an effort he had to abandon with the merger. Also, Lee's relationship with the Liberty Forward Party has been contentious, as its leader ran a bitter campaign against Lee in the presidential election. The Park camp and the LFP generally are more conservative than Lee, so he has been under pressure from his conservative flank. If Lee is unable to reconcile with Park, she and her 50 supporters in the GNP could defect from the party and significantly undermine the president's support in the National Assembly. In August 2009, Lee appointed Park to be special envoy to Europe in an apparent effort to mend fences with his political rival. The gesture, combined with Park's inability in June 2009 to succeed in her public effort to defeat a media reform bill the Lee government was pushing, appears to have reduced intra-party tensions for the time-being, although significant divisions within the GNP persist.

Challenges from the Left

The beef controversy marked just the beginning of Lee's domestic political problems. In May of this year, former South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun committed suicide after his family was investigated by prosecutors for possible corruption charges. Roh himself was not the initial target of the investigation but many South Koreans believed that the investigation was politically motivated. A nationwide tribute to Roh on May 29 brought out 5 million mourners, many of whom blamed Lee for his predecessor's suicide. Since then, Lee has been criticized for appearing aloof amid what many Koreans believe to be a national tragedy.

Adding to Lee's problems is mounting public concern that he is undermining freedom of speech in an attempt to shield his administration from intense media scrutiny. In July, the ruling GNP pushed through a controversial amendment to a broadcasting law that allows major businesses and newspapers to own stakes in South Korea's television network companies, which many consider to favor left-of-center policies. The main opposition Democratic Party (DP) fiercely opposed the amendment, including an attempt to physically prevent a vote from occurring on the floor of the National Assembly. In response to the bill's passage, the DP leader launched a hunger strike and dozens of its legislators tendered their resignations. The DP has argued that the bill would give conservative supporters of Lee (many of whom own the nation's largest corporations and newspapers) a monopoly on news coverage.

Despite the DP's dramatic opposition to the communications bill, the party has of late failed to coalesce into a unified political force. The political left in South Korea has been in the parliamentary minority at least since 2005. Since then, no clear leader appears to have emerged to rally the liberals into a unified political force. The death of former president Kim Dae-jung in August 2009 leaves the Left without a progressive leader in the southwestern Cholla region, one of South Korea's three major political regions (the others being Chung-chong in the center and Kyongsang in the southeast). Without a clear successor to unite the progressive factions, it appears unlikely that the Left will mobilize a challenge to Lee in the foreseeable future. The left wing faces structural obstacles as well. Under South Korea's parliamentary system opposition parties have relatively little influence in shaping legislation, further marginalizing the liberals in the current Assembly.

U.S.-ROK Relations¹⁰

Improved Official Ties

Since the fall of 2008, relations between the United States and South Korea (known officially as the Republic of Korea, or ROK) arguably have been at their best state in nearly a decade. This is largely due to three main factors: President Lee's emphasis on enhancing cooperation with Washington at the official level; a recent improvement—however tenuous—in favorable attitudes toward the United States among South Koreans; and Lee's hard-line stance toward North Korea. Among President Lee's initial goals as he entered into office was to shore up relations with the United States, which despite many bilateral accomplishments often were strained under former President Roh Moo-hyun. Lee also adopted a more hard-line policy toward North Korea by insisting on greater reciprocity in North-South relations and by linking South Korean inducements to progress on denuclearization. The increase in North Korea's belligerent actions in 2008 and 2009 have helped to harmonize the U.S. and South Korean policies toward Pyongyang and have intensified U.S.-ROK strategic and tactical coordination. The closeness of the relationship was symbolized by the June 16, 2009 summit between Presidents Obama and Lee that most analysts consider to have been highly successful. At the summit, the two sides signed a "Joint Vision" statement that foresees the transformation of the alliance's purpose, from one of primarily defending against a North Korean attack to a regional and even global alliance, in which Washington and Seoul cooperate on myriad issues, including climate change, energy security, terrorism, development, human rights promotion, as well as peacekeeping and the stabilization of post-conflict situations.¹¹

However, even as this broader vision is pursued and the alliance's fundamentals appear to be solid, a number of items may cause disagreements or even more serious tensions between the United States and South Korea. On North Korea, Seoul and Washington have had different priorities in the past, with South Koreans generally putting more emphasis on stability than on countering nuclear proliferation, the top U.S. priority. Throughout the spring and summer of 2009, unity in the face of North Korea's belligerence masked these differences, but they could re-surface if North Korea softens its stance over a sustained period. Lee's political vulnerabilities could make it politically difficult for Lee to push unpopular initiatives that the United States may desire, particularly in working out the structural and budgetary details of the alliance's transformation. A major area of contention between the two governments could be over the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA). Enacting the agreement is one of Lee's major foreign and domestic policy goals. The Obama Administration, however, has signaled that it does not plan to take action on the KORUS FTA in the foreseeable future and until ways are found to redress "imbalances," particularly in the auto sector.¹² It is widely believed that the agreement as it currently stands does not have sufficient support in Congress to be passed.¹³

¹⁰ For more, see CRS Report RL33567, *Korea-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress*, by (name redacted).

¹¹ White House Press Release, "Joint Vision For The Alliance Of The United States Of America And The Republic Of Korea," June 16, 2009. The joint statement also reiterates the U.S. commitment to provide extended nuclear deterrence to South Korea.

¹² In 2008, over 600,000 Korean motor vehicles (many of which were manufactured in U.S. plants) were sold in the United States in 2008, compared with exports of around 13,700 U.S. vehicles in South Korea.

¹³ For more on the KORUS FTA, see CRS Report RL34330, *The Proposed U.S.-South Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA): Provisions and Implications*, coordinated by (name redacted).

Shifting Public Attitudes Toward the United States

The recent upturn in South Korean public perceptions of the United States has helped to improve the overall atmosphere in bilateral relations of late. Public opinion toward the United States, and in particular anti-Americanism, have long colored U.S.-ROK relations. Anti-American sentiments pervaded segments of South Korean society during the 1970s and 1980s, when pro-democracy protesters blamed the United States for backing Seoul's authoritarian regimes. After the end of military rule, anti-American sentiments were largely confined to highly ideological groups, particularly student organizations, that generally operated on the political margins in Korea. In the late 1990s, however, criticism of U.S. policies moved into the mainstream, a shift that also has made anti-Americanism less ideological and more issue-specific. The criticisms range widely and include accusations that the U.S. government is hampering rapprochement between North and South Korea, that U.S. forces in South Korea are not sufficiently accountable for crimes they commit in South Korea, and that governments in Seoul too often cater to U.S. interests. This latter issue, experts argue, was the main point of contention that sparked the mass protests against U.S. beef imports last year.

Since the end of the beef protests, there has been a marked improvement in public attitudes toward the United States, providing President Lee with an opportunity to pursue closer ties with Washington under a somewhat less polarized atmosphere than existed last year. According to a recent global opinion survey, the United States currently has a 78% favorability rating in South Korea—the highest of any surveyed nation in Asia—owing in part to increased confidence in President Obama's leadership and his "multilateral" approach to foreign policy.¹⁴ Likewise, appreciation for the importance of the U.S.-ROK alliance, although generally high, has climbed to 87%¹⁵ in correlation with rising threat perceptions of North Korea.¹⁶ Another trend is that South Koreans increasingly view the United States (62%) as the most "beneficial political and diplomatic partner" in comparison to other key regional powers such as China (19%) and Japan (10%).¹⁷ Despite these statistics, South Korean public opinion can change rapidly and the currently favorable outlook toward the United States is likely to be temporal. For the time being, however, the relatively positive public outlook toward the United States has helped to diminish the politically charged atmosphere that has often overshadowed U.S.-ROK relations.

¹⁴ See "Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S. Image Around the World," *The Pew Global Attitudes Project*, July 23, 2009, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/264.pdf>. According to the survey 81% of South Koreans polled have confidence in President Obama (compared with 30% who had confidence in former President Bush in the 2009 survey), while 71% approve of his international policies.

¹⁵ See "South Koreans Reassured on Alliance," Office of Opinion Research, U.S. Department of State, August 17, 2009.

¹⁶ The Seoul-based East Asia Institute (EAI) notes that: "The leading characteristic in the U.S.-Korea alliance is that as the security situation becomes more uncertain, Koreans' support for the alliance increases." According to polls conducted by the EAI, South Korean support for the U.S.-ROK alliance registered dramatic increases after the North Korean nuclear tests in 2006 and earlier this year. See http://www.eai.or.kr/type/panelView.asp?catcode=1411100000&category=21&code=eng_report&idx=223.

¹⁷ "South Koreans Resist China's Orbit," Office of Opinion Research, U.S. Department of State, August 28, 2009.

Issues in the U.S.-ROK Military Alliance

U.S. Force Deployment and Base Relocation Plans

The stationing of U.S. forward deployed forces in South Korea is a particularly sensitive issue for the Korean public and has become an issue that Pentagon planners have increasingly had to contend with in their calculations of U.S. force levels on the Peninsula. In 2002, two Korean schoolgirls were accidentally killed by a U.S. military vehicle, leading to large-scale public protests against the U.S. troop presence, which is concentrated in densely populated civilian areas. The protests compelled then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to consider a reduction of the U.S. troop level in Korea from 37,000 to 25,000 by September 2008. However, current Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced in June 2008 that the drawdown would halt at 28,500 troops for the foreseeable future.¹⁸ The Rumsfeld plan also called for the withdrawal of one of the two combat brigades of the Second Infantry Division and sending them to Iraq (carried out in 2004), the pull back of the remainder of the Second Division from the demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating North and South Korea, and relocation of the Second Division and the 9,000 U.S. military personnel stationed at the Yongsan base in Seoul to a new base complex at Pyongtaek, 75 miles south of the DMZ. The relocations were scheduled for 2008, but they have been postponed to 2013 and possibly 2014 or beyond. U.S. and South Korean officials explain the delays as due to financial costs and delays in the construction of new facilities at Pyongtaek. Another complicating factor is the announcement by Secretary Gates that family members of U.S. military personnel will be allowed to live in South Korea, which is estimated eventually to add 35,000 to 40,000 to the American military community in South Korea.

In December 2008, the Pentagon and the South Korean Defense Ministry reached agreement on South Korea's share of the cost of stationing U.S. troops in South Korea. South Korea will pay 760 billion won (about U.S. \$570 million) for the stationing of 28,500 American troops in 2009. Its financial support is to increase each year on the basis of the inflation rate until the agreement expires in 2013.

Wartime Operational Control (OPCON)

Another key issue is implementation of a bilateral agreement to transfer wartime operational control (commonly referred to as OPCON) of military forces from U.S. to South Korean command—part of a South Korean proposal to abolish the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command and create separate U.S. and South Korean military commands. The agreement calls for the separate commands to be in place by 2012. The South Korean public has been divided on the plan since it was proposed in 2006, with sizeable percentages of Koreans concerned about the impact the move might have on the U.S.-ROK alliance. The public seems to have grown more comfortable with the OPCON transfer of late. According to polls, 50% of the public believe the OPCON transfer should be carried out as planned by 2012, while 35% believe it should be delayed indefinitely.¹⁹ South Korean President Lee, who took office after the agreement was

¹⁸ The 28,500 consists of about 20,000 U.S. Army personnel, mainly of the Second Infantry Division and military command personnel at the Yongsan garrison in Seoul. It also consists of about 9,000 U.S. Air Force personnel at two U.S. air bases that house three squadrons of F-16 aircraft.

¹⁹ "ROK Public: Small Steps toward an Enhanced Alliance," Office of Opinion Research, U.S. Department of State, May 6, 2009.

concluded, has held out the possibility of seeking a re-negotiation of the agreement before 2012. The Pentagon continues to support the plan, but a number of American experts believe that a re-negotiation could take place.

Afghanistan

In 2007, South Korea withdrew 200 non-combat military personnel from Afghanistan, and the government has not responded to the appeals of U.S. commanders for U.S. allies to send ground combat troops to Afghanistan to help deal with the resurgent Taliban. According to South Korean officials, President Obama asked President Lee to send ROK troops to Afghanistan during their summit meeting in June 2009. Press organs have reported that the Pentagon has urged South Korea to send military engineering units.²⁰ South Korea withdrew its 520 troops from Iraq at the end of 2008. The South Korean government agreed in 2009 to construct facilities at a U.S. military base in Afghanistan and provide ambulances and police patrol motorcycles, at a cost of \$200 million. President Lee said on June 20, 2009, that his government would consider deploying “peace-keeping troops” to Afghanistan. According to recent polls, just 30% of South Koreans who were surveyed support deploying Korean troops to Afghanistan, while nearly 80% prefer providing medical and humanitarian aid to help in reconstruction efforts.²¹

The KORUS FTA and Economic Issues

The dominant economic issue on the bilateral agenda is the fate of the KORUS FTA, which the Bush and Roh Moo-hyun governments signed in June 2007.²² If approved, the KORUS FTA would be the largest FTA that South Korea has signed to date and would be the second largest in which the United States participates (next to North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA). South Korea is the seventh-largest trading partner of the United States, and the United States is South Korea’s third largest trading partner (after China and Japan). Various studies conclude that the agreement would increase bilateral trade and investment flows.²³ The Lee and Roh governments have argued that the KORUS FTA will help transform the South Korean economy by making it more open, transparent, and competitive. Although the South Korean public was initially apprehensive about the KORUS FTA, polls indicate that the agreement has over time gained broad public support.²⁴ Additionally, many of the agreement’s proponents have touted the KORUS FTA’s strategic implications, arguing that it will help deepen the U.S.-South Korean alliance, and will boost the U.S. presence in East Asia, where most countries—including China—are negotiating numerous free trade agreements.

²⁰ “U.S. denies Asking for Korean Troops in Afghanistan,” *Chosun Ilbo Daily* (internet), May 14, 2009. “U.S. Calls on S. Korea to Deploy Troops to Afghanistan,” *Yonhap News Agency*, June 20, 2009.

²¹ “ROK Public: Small Steps toward an Enhanced Alliance,” Office of Opinion Research, U.S. Department of State, May 6, 2009.

²² For more on the KORUS FTA see CRS Report RL34330, *The Proposed U.S.-South Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA): Provisions and Implications*, coordinated by (name redacted).

²³ See, for instance, United States International Trade Commission (USITC). *U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement: Potential Economy-wide and Selected Sectoral Effects*. Investigation No. TA-2104-24. USITC Publication 3949. September 2007.

²⁴ An April 2009 U.S. State Department survey, for instance, found that 59% of Koreans favor ratification of the KORUS FTA, up from 47% a year earlier. See “South Korean Public Wants Free Trade Deal with U.S.,” Office of Opinion Research, U.S. Department of State, April 30, 2009.

The agreement will not enter into force unless Congress approves implementation legislation. The Obama Administration has not indicated if or when it will send the draft implementing bill to Congress. The Administration has stated that it is developing “benchmarks for progress” on resolving “concerns” it has with the KORUS FTA, particularly over market access for U.S. car exports. While U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk has called attention to the economic opportunities that the KORUS FTA presents, he also has said that if the Administration’s concerns are not resolved, “we’ll be prepared to step away....” When Presidents Obama and Lee met on June 16, 2009, in Washington, D.C., the two presidents remained publically noncommittal toward establishing a timeframe for acting to approve the agreement, although Lee has on his own repeatedly stressed the importance of ratifying the agreement.

In South Korea the politics of the KORUS FTA likely will make it difficult for the Lee government to appear to accede to new U.S. demands. This is particularly due to memories of the 2008 beef protests. The South Korean National Assembly has yet to vote on the KORUS FTA—though it has been approved by the Foreign Affairs, Trade and Unification Committee—and is debating whether or not to do so before the U.S. Congress acts. It is expected that the Assembly would pass the agreement, at least in its current version. Many experts warn that South Korea would suffer a deep sense of humiliation if the U.S. Congress were to reject the KORUS FTA after its potential ratification in the National Assembly—an outcome that could have broader political and possibly even strategic consequences for the U.S.-ROK relationship. South Korea has signed and is negotiating a number of other FTAs, including one with the European Union that was signed in July 2009.

Regional Diplomacy

South Korea’s diplomatic approach toward neighboring Northeast Asian nations has changed significantly since President Lee succeeded Roh Moo-hyun in 2008. This is, in part, a corollary of the shift both in Seoul’s policy toward North Korea and the United States after the change of administrations in South Korea in 2008. The Roh administration’s generally unconditional engagement of Pyongyang often put it at odds with the harder line advocated by Japan and the United States, while aligning South Korea more closely with pro-engagement China in the Six-Party Talks aimed at resolving the North Korea nuclear crisis. Roh described South Korea as a “strategic balancer” between what he saw as the pro-engagement camp (China and Russia) and the hard-line camp (the United States and Japan) that sought to pressure Pyongyang into dismantling its nuclear weapons program. The balancer role seemed to diminish the solidarity of the U.S.-ROK alliance which, along with Roh’s calls for greater independence from Washington, severely strained Seoul’s ties with the Bush Administration. Over time, as South Korean threat perceptions of North Korea increased throughout the decade, so did South Koreans’ public approval ratings of the United States, weakening support for key aspects of Roh’s overall foreign policy.

President Lee entered office in 2008 pledging to restore alliance relations with the United States and demanding a “reciprocal” relationship with Pyongyang. His tougher stance toward the regime repositions South Korea in the U.S.-led camp, as Seoul seeks to enhance coordination with Tokyo and Washington in presenting a unified front against North Korean provocations.

Although this shift in policy has strained inter-Korean relations, it has arguably led to a net, if modest, improvement in South Korea’s overall diplomatic outlook in the region. Lee’s focus on an alliance-oriented approach to North Korea has, at least, eased tensions with Washington and

provided a pretext for closer political and strategic cooperation with Japan. The closer coordination between Seoul, Tokyo and Washington has not noticeably damaged South Korean diplomatic ties with China. Lee's active diplomatic outreach since coming to office may have helped to ease potential concerns in Beijing about South Korea's strategic direction. Indeed, Beijing has not taken explicit steps to discourage Lee from repositioning his nation outside the pro-engagement camp. Over the past year, a flurry of diplomatic activity between Seoul and Beijing leaves little doubt that smooth relations with China remain a priority for South Korea, despite rising competition between the two countries over export markets and natural resources.

Seoul has also enhanced its leadership role in multilateral institutions and regional fora as it seeks to carve out a higher profile in a region dominated by China, Japan and the United States. In September 2009, Lee announced that South Korea would chair and host the November 2010 G-20 meeting, a gathering that will showcase South Korea's leadership in the global financial crisis. In May/June 2009, President Lee hosted a summit with the ten-member nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).²⁵ In addition to signing an investment-protection treaty as part of the concluding terms of a free trade agreement (FTA) with ASEAN, South Korea offered to enhance development assistance, cooperation on clean energy initiatives, training and education, and other measures to deepen ties with the region. Analysts believe these steps are, in part, aimed at expanding and deepening South Korea's ties with key export markets and is a sign of increasingly assertive regional leadership from Seoul.

Inter-Korean Relations

Since entering office, Lee has made major changes to Seoul's policy toward North Korea. After ten years of Seoul's policy of largely unconditioned reconciliation with North Korea—often dubbed the “sunshine policy”—the Lee government entered office insisting on more reciprocity from and conditionality toward Pyongyang. Most importantly, initiating new large-scale inter-Korean projects, agreed to before Lee took office, would be reviewed and linked to progress in denuclearizing North Korea. Lee's administration also offered to continue humanitarian assistance—provided North Korea first requests such aid—and indicated that existing inter-Korean projects would be continued. Lee has been openly critical of human rights conditions in North Korea, reversing his predecessor's policy. Lee also has issued various iterations of his “3,000 Policy” pledge during the 2007 presidential campaign to help raise North Korea's per capita income to \$3,000 over the next ten years.²⁶ These initiatives appear to complement the “comprehensive” package the Obama Administration has indicated would be forthcoming if North Korea took positive steps on the nuclear front.

North Korea reacted to Lee's policies by unleashing a wave of invective against Lee, adopting a more hostile stance toward official inter-Korean activities, and tightening restrictions on the North-South Kaesong Industrial Complex, which operates in North Korea. The result was the cessation or severe curtailment of most of the inter-Korean meetings, hotlines, tours, exchanges, and other programs that had been established over the past decade.²⁷ Following the North's May

²⁵ ASEAN member states include Brunei Darussalam, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Singapore, Myanmar, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia.

²⁶ Christian Oliver, “Seoul Plans \$40bn Aid Fund for N Korea,” *Financial Times*, July 20, 2009.

²⁷ Some figures quantify the downturn in relations: official bilateral dialogues were down from 55 in 2007 to 6 in 2008; South Korea's governmental humanitarian assistance declined from 3.5 million won (\$215 million) to 0.4 million won (\$25 million); and government-run reunions of family members fell from over 3,600 to zero. After years of double- (continued...)

25, 2009 nuclear test, South Korea formally joined the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a U.S.-led coalition group formed in 2003 aimed at stopping countries from proliferating weapons of mass destruction. Since Pyongyang's failed satellite launch on April 5, 2009, which used ballistic missile-related technology, Seoul has prohibited virtually all visits by South Koreans to North Korea, aside from trips made in conjunction with the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

Since August 2009, there have been some indications of a slight thaw in inter-Korean relations. It is still uncertain whether North Korea's overtures are part of a gradual trend toward improved North-South relations or are merely temporary aberrations in the bilateral dynamic. Analysts point out that President Lee has tried to quell speculation of a possible North-South summit or any other "thaw" in relations between the two countries.²⁸

Public opinion polls of South Koreans have tended to show mixed feelings on relations with North Korea. While a majority appear to favor Seoul adopting more reciprocity in inter-Korean relations than was true during the heyday of the "sunshine policy" of Lee's predecessors Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, most also appear to favor maintaining some form of diplomatic and economic engagement with North Korea.²⁹ This ambivalence sets boundaries beyond which South Korean policy-makers are often loathe to cross. In the short term, public and elite opinion on North Korea policy appear to be affected by three main variables: the sense of threat from North Korea, the extent to which the United States is perceived to be ignoring Seoul in Washington-Pyongyang relations, and the perception that China is expanding its influence in North Korea at South Korea's expense.

ROK-Japan Relations

Ties between South Korea and Japan have improved markedly over the last year, although the pattern of bilateral behavior in the past shows that such trends can be short-lived.³⁰ As South Korea and Japan are key U.S. allies in Northeast Asia, the health of their bilateral relationship is of direct importance to U.S. strategic interests in the region. Only a few years ago historical and territorial disputes threatened to spark a "diplomatic war" between the two countries. Major differences over these issues remain, particularly over the long disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islands.³¹ However, Seoul and Tokyo have recently chosen to focus on coordinating a united front against ongoing North Korean provocations rather than on lingering disagreements. In addition to diplomatic cooperation, Lee and former Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso pledged to re-launch negotiations on a proposed bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) during their bilateral summit

(...continued)

digit growth, inter-Korean trade registered a mere 1.2% increase from 2007 to 2008. Figures are from Ministry of Unification, "Inter-Korean Relations in 2008," February 2009. North-South Korean trade was just over \$1.8 billion in 2008.

²⁸ See "South Korea Signals Unchanged DPRK Strategy Amid Media Speculation," Open Source Center, August 27, 2009.

²⁹ According to an April 2009 State Department survey, 60% of South Koreans are critical of Lee's handling of North Korea affairs, while 32% support his measures. See "South Koreans React with Concern to DPRK," Office of Opinion Research, U.S. Department of State, April 27, 2009.

³⁰ Both former presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun promised forward-leaning ties with Japan early in their administrations, but were eventually drawn into bilateral disputes over history and territorial issues.

³¹ South Korea maintains administrative control over what it calls the Dokdo islands, although Japan claims sovereignty over the territory, which it calls the Takeshima islands.

meeting in Tokyo on June 28. Both sides have also signed a new agreement that would enhance military cooperation through increased defense exchanges, joint search-and-rescue operations, reciprocal port visits, and other confidence-building measures. The South Korean public, however, remains deeply wary of Japanese strategic intentions despite closer official ties between the two countries. Historical issues are likely to reemerge in 2010—the 100th anniversary of Japan’s annexation of Korea. This event may put to test newly elected Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama’s pledge to reconcile historical grievances with South Korea as well as Lee’s promise of a “forward-looking” relationship with Japan. Hatoyama is reportedly planning to visit Seoul in early October to discuss bilateral issues with his counterpart, including a potential goodwill visit to South Korea by Japanese Emperor Akihito. The Japanese prime minister’s pledge not to visit the controversial Yasukuni Shrine has been positively received in South Korea.

ROK-China Relations

South Korea’s relations with China reflect the complex nature of the bilateral relationship as both economies become increasingly interdependent and as both nations seek a generally cooperative relationship despite their increasingly competitive rivalry in the global economy. Sino-Korea relations perhaps reached a high-point earlier this decade, as the Roh administration saw eye-to-eye with Beijing’s engagement of North Korea. This was accompanied by unusually high public favorability toward China, whose rising global status was widely viewed in Korea as a commercial opportunity rather than a strategic concern. China has, in fact, replaced the United States as South Korea’s leading trade partner, accounting for roughly 22% of its exports and 18% of its imports in 2008.³²

South Koreans’ somewhat sanguine perceptions of China started to change in 2004, when Beijing claimed that the ancient Korean kingdom of Koguryo was in fact a suzerain state of China. This sparked a nationalist backlash that shattered the idealized image of China shared by many South Koreans.³³ Since then, the perception of China’s rise as primarily an opportunity for expanded trade has changed to a more cautious outlook and growing awareness of economic competition between the two countries, particularly over energy resources, while still recognizing the commercial potential of Korean investments in China.³⁴ Furthermore, China’s increased economic penetration into North Korea has raised South Korean concerns that Seoul might “lose” North Korea to China.

President Lee’s diplomatic approach toward Beijing has been something of a balancing act. On one hand, Lee has sought a stable and cooperative strategic relationship with China, even as he has distanced South Korea from Beijing’s engagement policy toward North Korea. In June 2008, South Korea and China agreed to a “strategic cooperative partnership” that is aimed at enhancing bilateral cooperation across a range of sectors, including diplomatic, economic and security issues.³⁵ Although falling short of a formal alliance, the partnership may be one way for Seoul to

³² See <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2800.htm>.

³³ According to U.S. State Department polls, the Korean public’s favorability ratings toward China slipped from 70% in 2004 to 45% in 2009. See “South Koreans Resist China’s Orbit,” Office of Opinion Research, U.S. Department of State, August 28, 2009.

³⁴ As of August 2009, 66% of Koreans believe China is likely to be an economic competitor rather than partner (31%) in the future, according to State Department surveys. In the political/security sphere, 69% of Koreans believe China is more likely to be a “competitor and rival” than an “ally and partner” of Korea in the future. *Ibid.*

³⁵ See “China-ROK Joint Statement” at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/2649/t469103.htm>.

allay Chinese concerns of strengthened alliance relations between South Korea and the United States.³⁶ On the other hand, Lee has been wary of the increasingly direct competition between Korean and Chinese firms over global export markets, foreign oil reserves, and sources of food imports.³⁷ A key challenge for Lee and his successors will likely be to strike the right balance between economic competition and political and strategic cooperation with China over the long-term.

ROK-Russia Relations

Another regional power that South Korea must contend with is Russia. Although two decades have passed since the normalization of ROK-Russia relations, economic and political ties between the two nations are still relatively underdeveloped. Russian and South Korean officials have worked in tandem in the context of the Six-Party Talks over North Korea, but bilateral cooperation even in that framework has been relatively limited. President Lee, however, has attempted to deepen ties with Moscow as part of his strategy of expanding Seoul's resource diplomacy. In September 2008, Lee made his first visit to Moscow to meet with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. The bilateral meetings produced a set of ambitious proposals for joint Russian-South Korean commercial and energy projects, including a plan to construct a gas pipeline linking the two countries across the Korean Peninsula. The pipeline could ostensibly cross North Korean territory, an idea that has yet to be signed on to by Pyongyang. Presumably, though, some of the gas could be diverted to the North as an inducement to the regime for its cooperation in the project. Many analysts believe that the significant obstacles facing the gas pipeline project leave it unlikely to proceed in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, the proposal demonstrates South Korea's increasingly ambitious efforts to secure energy resources beyond its borders.

Options and Implications for the United States

In many respects, U.S.-ROK relations are more stable today than they have been in years, yet experts warn that this stability is precarious at best and will need careful diplomacy to be sustained beyond the immediate future. For the United States, which has had a long and complicated history of involvement in Korea, policies toward either end of the Korean Peninsula tend to reverberate powerfully in South Korean sociopolitical spheres. As the United States pursues its own interests and priorities in Korea and the East Asian region, it will inevitably set off negative reactions in South Korea from time to time. Many believe that, without compromising key U.S. objectives, the United States can achieve more with South Korea if it is mindful of South Korean sensitivities that could morph into latent anti-Americanism.

Of perhaps paramount importance is for U.S. policymakers to fully appreciate South Korea's ongoing transition, from a once client-like relationship with the United States to an increasingly important international power in its own right. This transition is not complete, either in terms of

³⁶ Scott Snyder, "Lee Myung-bak's Foreign Policy: A 250-Day Assessment," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, March 2009. Snyder writes: "For China, the main point [of the strategic cooperative partnership] is that a political embrace is necessary and desirable to pull South Korea closer, especially in light of the prospect of a strengthened South Korean relationship with the United States" (p.13).

³⁷ Ibid. For more on Sino-Korean relations see Scott Snyder, "China's Rise and the Two Koreas: Politics, Economics, Security," Lynne Rienner Publications, 2009.

Korea's democratic development or in the collective psyche of the nation. But it is clear, as experts point out, that South Korea increasingly desires greater respect from Washington as it continues along this process. Indeed, in at least a tacit acknowledgement of South Korea's increased clout, the Bush Administration took a number of steps—such as negotiating the KORUS FTA, admitting South Korea into the U.S. Visa Waiver Program, and agreeing to move U.S. troops from the Yongsan base in Seoul—that were sought by South Korea.

Over the near term, there are several areas that may test U.S. forbearance in the eyes of the South Korean public and policy elite. One fundamental concern is perceived U.S. involvement in South Korean domestic affairs. The election of President Lee in December 2007 brought to power an administration that promised closer ties with the United States than its predecessor. While there are certain advantages to this change, the outcome of the beef protests in 2008 highlights the political perils of a South Korean leader appearing to be too closely aligned with Washington. Experts stress that the perception of undue U.S. involvement in South Korean politics, or seemingly overt support for one political leader over another, can lead to a public backlash that ultimately harms bilateral relations. Given the relatively similar outlook shared by Korean conservatives and the U.S. government, some experts suggest that Washington should enhance efforts to cultivate ties with opposition lawmakers—thus lending greater credibility to the United States as a fair and impartial supporter of South Korean democracy.

North Korea policy is another inherently sensitive issue that requires careful implementation by Washington. So far, both the Lee and Obama administrations have closely coordinated their approach toward Pyongyang—presenting a united front, along with Japan, against continued North Korean provocations. Yet signs that the Obama administration may be willing to negotiate bilaterally with North Korea to bring the regime back to the Six-Party Talks have raised some concern in Seoul that the close coordination with Washington may be in jeopardy. As the Obama Administration seeks to find a diplomatic solution to the North Korea crisis, experts advise that it will be critical for Washington to continue to consult closely with Seoul on any developments that may arise during bilateral talks with North Korea. This would likely go a long way toward demonstrating U.S. recognition of South Korea's stake in the stability of the Korean Peninsula.

Another delicate bilateral issue relates to the implementation of planned changes to the U.S.-ROK alliance, including measures to realign U.S. military bases in Korea and to transfer wartime operational command (OPCON) from U.S. to South Korean forces. Both measures, which are aimed at giving the United States military a less dominant presence and role in South Korea, touch on anxieties within the Korean national security establishment about the sustainability of the U.S. strategic commitment. Yet it is likely that the U.S. military will move forward on these measures as scheduled, partly because North Korea's conventional military forces continue to deteriorate. As it proceeds with the implementation phase, some analysts believe the United States must take care to coordinate these changes in close cooperation with Korean policymakers and in a timetable and manner that is acceptable to Seoul. Failure to do so, analysts believe, could lead to a crisis in the bilateral alliance relationship. Other analysts argue that the timetable for transfer should be pushed to a later date, in part because they believe South Korea is not yet militarily ready and in part because the change is opposed by many South Korean conservatives.

An issue that is of particular concern to Congress is the fate of the U.S.-ROK Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA), which both governments signed in June 2007. Should the KORUS FTA fail to be ratified by Congress, the implications for the U.S.-ROK relationship and for the political situation in Seoul could be significant. The potential rejection or prolonged delay of the KORUS agreement, as it currently exists, would likely require skillful diplomacy by U.S.

officials to avoid significant political repercussions in South Korea. The damage could be magnified if, as expected, the Administration were to highlight or even exaggerate the KORUS FTA's strategic rather than economic value. While raising the stakes may increase the agreement's chances of passage in Congress, it also increases the symbolic costs to the alliance—particularly in South Korea—if the agreement is not ratified. Alternatively, the current agreement could be renegotiated or amended to give it a better chance of ratification by Congress. Experts warn that modifying the KORUS agreement would involve restarting a complex and delicate negotiating process with Seoul that could further deplete President Lee's political capital at home. The Lee Administration therefore may ask for some form of *quid pro quo* to provide political cover for any modification that appears to be a concession to the United States.

Despite lingering challenges in U.S.-ROK relations the trajectory of bilateral ties appears generally promising over the long-run. South Korea's growing stature on the world stage creates increased opportunities for the bilateral relationship to evolve beyond its traditional scope of counterbalancing North Korea. Indeed, President Lee's plan to enhance his nation's international profile along the lines of a "Global Korea" complements the "Joint Vision" that he signed with President Obama in June 2009—an agreement that provides a conceptual roadmap for upgrading bilateral cooperation to the global level.³⁸ Assuming that the challenges outlined above are adequately addressed, the next test in the U.S.-ROK relationship will be implementing aspects of the Joint Vision and determining further areas for bilateral cooperation on the world stage.

³⁸ Many experts note that discussion of an expanded alliance does not necessarily suggest that South Korea will be expected to play a larger role in contributing to the U.S.-led effort to fight Islamic terrorism.

Appendix. South Korea's Political System: Background, Structure and Key Institutional Actors

Background

For most of the first four decades after the country was founded in 1948, South Korea was ruled by authoritarian governments. Ever since the mid-1980s, when widespread anti-government protests forced the country's military rulers to enact sweeping democratic reforms, democratic institutions and traditions have deepened in South Korea. In 1997, long-time dissident and opposition politician Kim Dae-jung (commonly referred to as "DJ") was elected to the presidency, the first time an opposition party had prevailed in a South Korean presidential election. In December 2002, Kim was succeeded by a member of his left-of-center party, Roh Moo-hyun, a self-educated former human rights lawyer who emerged from relative obscurity to defeat establishment candidates in both the primary and general elections. Roh campaigned on a platform of reform—reform of Korean politics, economic policymaking, and U.S.-ROK relations. Lee Myung-bak's victory in the December 2007 election restored conservatives to the presidency. A striking feature of the election was how poorly the left-of-center candidates performed, after a decade in power, receiving only around 30% of the vote.

A Structurally Weak Legislative Branch

Nominally, power in South Korea is shared by the president, who is elected to one five-year term, and the 299-member unicameral National Assembly. Of these, 245 members represent single-member constituencies. The remaining 54 are selected on the basis of proportional voting. National Assembly members are elected to four-year terms. The next national legislative elections will be held in April 2012, which is also the year of South Korea's next presidential election (scheduled for December).

Since the Assembly's powers were enhanced in the 1987 constitution, it has at times altered the political climate by providing opposition parties with a forum to freely criticize, inspect, and embarrass the executive branch. Indeed, one of the Assembly's major accomplishments since 1987 has been to institutionalize its oversight of the executive; executive branch officials regularly appear before committees, helping to make South Korean policy-making more transparent than before. Also, from time to time, opposition parties have used Assembly proceedings to successfully stymie presidential initiatives, usually by boycotting legislative sessions. In 2004, the conservative-dominated National Assembly voted to impeach then-President Roh Moo-hyun, a vote that was overturned by South Korea's Constitutional Court.

In reality, however, the president and the state bureaucracy continue to be the dominant forces in South Korean policymaking, as formal and informal limitations prevent the National Assembly from initiating major pieces of legislation. For instance, by law the Assembly can only cut funds from the president's budget, not propose any increases or alter the executive's budgetary allocations. South Korean legislators suffer from numerous other limitations. The typical Seoul legislative office, for instance, is staffed by only three salaried, full-time workers. Even the prime minister, who has little power, is nominated by the president. The fact that parties in the Assembly repeatedly have resorted to the brinkmanship tactic of the boycott reflects the legislative branch's

weakness. The most recent boycott occurred in June 2008, when the opposition Democratic Party refused to participate in the new Assembly's session.

Institution-Building by the National Assembly

In recent years, the National Assembly has sought to increase its resources through the creation of a National Assembly Budget Office (modeled on the U.S. Congressional Budget Office) and the National Assembly Research Service (modeled on the U.S. Congressional Research Service, and the Government Accountability Office).

The Assembly's Other Powers

A bill in the National Assembly may be introduced by members or by the executive branch. If passed, a bill is sent to the executive for presidential promulgation within 15 days. The president may veto the bill and send it back to the National Assembly for reconsideration. If the assembly overrides the veto with the concurrence of two-thirds or more of members present, the bill will become law. With respect to the judiciary, the consent of the National Assembly is also required for the presidential appointment of all Supreme Court justices. Also required is the ratification by the Assembly of treaties and agreements as well as international acts or conventions to which South Korea is a signatory. The declaration of war, the dispatch of troops abroad, or the stationing of foreign troops in South Korean territory requires the consent of the Assembly as well.

Political Parties

South Korean political parties form, disband, and merge regularly, in part because they tend to be regionally-based and centered around charismatic personalities rather than substantive issues. It is not uncommon for members of the National Assembly to jump from one party to another. Presently, there are three major political parties in South Korea: President Lee Myung-bak's conservative GNP; the opposition center-left Democratic Party; and the hard right Liberal Forward Party, which is primarily a platform for former GNP heavyweight Lee Hoi-chang.³⁹ Both the GNP and the Democratic Party are riven by competing factions and ideological differences over major issues, particularly over the appropriate policies to take toward North Korea and the United States.

Regionalism

South Korean politics is highly regionalized. The GNP's base is in the southeastern and industrialized Kyongsang (also known as Yongnam) region, where Lee won over 60% of the vote in the 2007 election. (If LFP party head Lee Hoi-chang's total is added to Lee's, the conservative candidates won around 80% of the Yongnam vote) The DP's base lies in the southwestern and more rural Cholla region (also known as Honam), where its candidate Chung Dong-young won nearly 80% of the vote. Before Kim Dae-jung's victory in the 1997 presidential election, South Korea's military governments gave preferential treatment to the Kyongsang region, leading Cholla residents to accuse the government of discrimination. The greater Seoul area, which is the home of nearly half of the South Korean electorate, has emerged as the crucial swing vote in

³⁹ Lee was the runner-up in both the 1997 and 2002 elections, losing both by less than 3 percentage points of the vote.

presidential elections. There has been discussion of combating regionalism by adopting multiple-seat constituencies in the National Assembly.

NGOs

Since the end of military rule, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have increased dramatically in South Korea, particularly in the past ten years. The groups exist on both the local and national levels, range widely in size, and focus on a wide array of issues, including the environment, government and corporate corruption, disability rights, women's rights, crimes committed by U.S. forces in Korea, revising the U.S.-ROK Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), and returning land used by U.S. forces. In contrast to the student-led, class-based groups of the 1980s that spent much of their time organizing militant anti-government and anti-U.S. protests, an increasing number of NGOs have hired permanent staff, held fundraisers, and opened research offices. As they have begun to professionalize their operations, they have had a greater impact on South Korean domestic and foreign policy.

South Korean NGOs have been particularly adept at forming loose, temporary coalitions with one another to organize large-scale protests on a particular issue. Many of the most successful examples of citizen activism in South Korea involved the formation of umbrella organizations that pool the resources of member groups. The country's rapid adoption of the Internet—South Korea has one of the world's highest rates of Internet usage—has facilitated such networking by enabling groups to quickly establish linkages, coordinate activities, and spread the word about protest activities. The spring 2008 beef protests and anti-American protests in 2002 are two illustrations of this point.

Decentralization

The influence of Korean civil society groups has been possible in part because of the growing decentralization of power in South Korea. In the early and mid-1990s, new laws were passed creating local assemblies and establishing popular election of local officials for the first time since the 1950s. Increased local autonomy has encouraged political consciousness and activism, as South Koreans have come to expect local and national elected leaders to be more responsive and accountable to their constituents. Despite these changes, Seoul remains the locus of political power in South Korea, in part because local governments have little authority to impose their own taxes. Former President Roh attempted further decentralize political power by giving more autonomy to the provinces and by transferring certain executive offices to locations outside of Seoul.

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