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South Korea and the United States Sixty Years On

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September 8, 2005, marks the sixtieth anniversary of the arrival of US soldiers on the Korean peninsula to accept the surrender of Japanese forces. There will likely be little fanfare accompanying this event. At the end of World War II, Koreans viewed the Soviets and the Americans equally as liberators, and neither occupation force was expected to stay long on Korean soil. The special relationship between South Korea and the United States was forged by later events: the formation of the Republic of Korea (ROK) under American auspices in August 1948, the Korean War of 1950–53, and the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1954. The US-ROK alliance was, as the North Koreans and Chinese like to say of their own relationship, a "friendship cemented in blood," marked by memories of shared sacrifice. It also involved the stationing of tens of thousands of American troops in South Korea. For over forty years, the purpose of this alliance was seen by both sides as clear and unambiguous: defending South Korea, as part of the "free world," against the threat of the North, backed by China and the Soviet Union. The loosening of cold war alignments and the Soviet collapse in the late 1980s and early 1990s problematized but did not fundamentally alter this sense of shared purpose. But in the last ten years, and especially the last five, the US and South Korea have drifted increasingly farther apart in their views of the North Korean threat, and the nature of US-ROK relations more generally. While new critical attitudes toward the US in South Korea are often portrayed in the Western media rather simplistically as "anti-Americanism," in fact they reflect a changing and increasingly complex relationship between America and Korea, between the ROK and North Korea (DPRK), and between Korea and its regional neighbors. The cold war is, in fact, finally and belatedly ending in and around the Korean peninsula, and with it the structure of international relationships it created.

Unlike many other countries, Korea does not commemorate August 15, 1945 as the end of a war so much as the onset of liberation from colonial rule. While "8.15" is a watershed event in historical memory, other dates loom equally large if not larger: August 1948 (the founding of the ROK); June 1950 (the outbreak of the Korean War); and July 1953 (the Korean War armistice). The fiftieth anniversary of each of these, recently past, has been fraught with significance. In 1998, the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Republic, South Korea was in the midst of the Asian financial crisis and under the leadership of President Kim Dae Jung, elected the previous December. The ROK overcame this crisis, dubbed "Korea's worst moment since the Korean War," but the sacrifices demanded by the controversial IMF bailout called into question Korea's "miracle economy" and the benevolence of the US in assisting its Korean ally.

The anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950, was preceded ten days earlier by an unprecedented summit meeting in Pyongyang between the leaders of the two Koreas, Kim Jong Il and Kim Dae Jung. Subsequently, for the first time the June 25 celebrations in South Korea were not marked by pageantry and parades, but by a more subdued acknowledgement of the war's costs and consequences, and hopeful messages about ending the division that led to the war's outbreak. The Kim-Kim summit was trumpeted as "first steps toward unification;" the point, it seemed, was no longer to win the war, but to end it. Significantly, the inter-Korean summit marked the first major step the two Korean governments had taken toward improving their mutual relationship at their own initiative, and not as a response to the actions of their allies. For its part, the US, although officially supporting inter-Korean dialogue, was relatively cool toward Seoul's overtures to North Korea. Kim Dae Jung's "sunshine policy" of engagement with the North would be strongly criticized in the Bush administration that came into power in 2001; at this point, the rift between the ROK and the US became impossible to miss.

By the time of the anniversary of the end of the war in 1953, US-ROK relations were at their lowest point in history. The nadir of the US-ROK relationship came in the winter of 2002-03, when tens of thousands of Koreans participated in candlelight vigils calling for US accountability in the deaths of two schoolgirls accidentally killed by American military vehicles. This action was embedded in a broader sense of unease and ambivalence about Korea's relationship with the United States, and especially about the US military presence. The Bush administration's belligerent rhetoric toward North Korea played no small part in this, but it was exacerbated by the war in Iraq, which many saw as a chilling precedent for an attack on North Korea, identified by President Bush, with Iraq and Iran as part of an "axis of evil."

In a country that had been almost unique in its overwhelmingly pro-American popular opinion a generation earlier, statistics reflected a sharp change of attitude. For example, a poll by the Joongang Ilbo newspaper, taken in December 2002, revealed that 36.4% of South Koreans viewed the US unfavorably, only 13% favorably, and 50% were neutral. Within these statistics, there were striking differences according to age: only among those in the over-50 age group did the majority express a favorable opinion. Furthermore, 62% of South Koreans in their 20s and 72% in their 30s wanted to restructure the US-ROK alliance to make it more equal; only 21% of those in their 60s agreed with this.

Again, there is more going on here than simply the general rise of "anti-Americanism." Several factors contribute to this changing Korean attitude toward the US, sixty years after liberation from Japanese colonialism. First, there has been a generational change, with the rise to power of the "386" generation (Koreans in their 30s, who entered university in the 1980s and were born in the 1960s), who had come of age in the era of democratic protest, a time when criticism of the authoritarian ROK governments, and of the Americans who had backed them, went hand-in-hand. With the rise of this generation came the decline in influence of the conservative and reflexively pro-US political establishment that had dominated South Korean politics since liberation. While the current conservative opposition is by no means insignificant, it seems unlikely that a simplistic "pro-Americanism" will ever return as the dominant mode in South Korea.

Second, there has been the growth of a vocal and critical civil society, and with it a re-examination of historical events and memories both by the government and various non-governmental organizations. Historical investigation commissions have been formed to examine various aspects of the Japanese colonial period, as well as events in which the US played a direct or indirect role: the Kwangju Massacre of 1980, the bloody suppression of the Cheju Island uprising in April 1948, missing persons from the period of military rule, and so on, inspired in part by similar such commissions formed in the post-authoritarian states of South Africa, Argentina, the former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere. Significantly, investigators are probing not only the role of the US, but also of the former ROK government and citizens. Citizens' activism and participatory democracy have become part of the political landscape and everyday vocabulary of today's South Korea, with the explosive growth of NGOs, many quite critical of US policy. The organization of such groups and activities has been greatly facilitated by the use of the internet, in which South Korea ranks among the highest in the world, and the concomitant rise of what Koreans call "Netizens."

Third, with the relative decline of South Koreans' sense of affinity with the US, there has been a strong turn toward Asia, especially China but also, in complex ways, Japan. China has replaced the US as South Korea's largest trading partner; more Korean students now study in China than in America; South Korean popular culture has become all the rage in Japan, China, and Southeast Asia, while Japanese culture -- long banned by the South Korean government -- has taken off in Korea. On the other hand, the current dispute over Tokdo/Takeshima, as well as the controversy over the Japanese textbook issue and war memories more generally, reflect underlying differences between Korea and Japan that need to be resolved before relations between the two countries can become stable and friendly over the long term. And yet, despite these tensions, Koreans have increasingly warmed to the idea of an East Asian free trade area, and even a European Union-style economic and political community, although these may be only be a distant dream at this point.

Finally, South Korean views of North Korea have changed markedly in recent years, and stand in striking contrast to the hardline policy of the Bush administration. While there are many differences within South Korea about how to deal with the North, there is a growing consensus that North-South cooperation is beneficial to both sides, that gradual reunification is preferable to sudden collapse and absorption of North Korea by the ROK, that the North Korean threat can be managed, and that it is better to change North Korea's undesirable behavior by persuasion rather than by coercion. Such views in broad form are shared across much of the political spectrum in South Korea, including the conservative Grand National Party, led by Park Geun-hye, daughter of former South Korean dictator Park Chung Hee. The Bush Administration approaches North Korea very differently, creating a deep unease among many in South Korea.

One hears that Korea is the last outpost of the cold war, but that may be true only for Americans. For a growing number of South Koreans, their cold war -- a North-South conflict that began in the aftermath of colonial liberation and destroyed the universal hope for a peaceful, independent and unified post-colonial Korea -- is already over. Sixty years marks the end of a life cycle in East Asian tradition, a time for reflection, re-evaluation, and recognition that things can never be the same. Koreans have already begun this process; it remains for outsiders, Americans in particular, to recognize that a new cycle is underway.

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