



## **Making Sense of Korean Anti-Americanism**

by Brad Glosserman

WASHINGTON DC - Opinion polls around the world show increasing numbers of people believe that the U.S. is arrogant, unilateralist, and indifferent to key concerns of other nations - even friends and allies. This sentiment is especially powerful in South Korea, a nation for which the U.S. shed blood in a violent civil war a half century ago, and a frontline ally in the nuclear crisis with North Korea. Pollster William Watts sees "a rising tide of anti-Americanism that has assumed proportions previously unseen on the Korean Peninsula."

The list of South Korean grievances includes:

- anger at the deaths of two schoolgirls run over last summer by a U.S. Army vehicle during maneuvers. The acquittal of the two soldiers driving the vehicle by a U.S. military tribunal set off mass demonstrations by hundreds of thousands of Koreans of all ages across the political spectrum.
- the terms of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that require U.S. soldiers be tried for crimes committed in the performance of their duties by U.S. military courts. (This is despite ROK laws that provide its own soldiers similar treatment.)
- heavy-handed U.S. efforts to "force" Seoul to buy a U.S.-made plane in a competition for the next generation Korean fighter aircraft.
- the treatment of ROK President Kim Dae-jung during his summit with President Bush in the spring of 2001 and the widespread belief that the U.S. is hostile to Kim's Sunshine Policy of engagement with the North and has worked to undermine it.
- the "robbing" of a Korean speed skater of a gold medal in the Salt Lake City Olympics so that an American could win; Koreans still recall tasteless jokes made by U.S. comedians about that incident.

All of these incidents are laid upon a foundation of bitterness, resentment, and victimization produced by South Korea's status as the junior partner in an security alliance, the belief that the U.S. does not sufficiently appreciate the ROK, the continuing division of the Korean Peninsula, and the persistence of Cold War tensions.

Earlier this month, Korea specialists and scholars examined the unprecedented strains in the U.S.-ROK alliance and the results of that scrutiny were not encouraging. Our discussions focused on anti-Americanism - or what should really be called "anti-Americanisms." One participant counted more than 15 different versions of the malady during the two days of meetings, prompting speculation that we were talking

about different things - or a phenomenon so encompassing as to be virtually meaningless if we are ever going to diagnose or fix it. A commentator acknowledged the differences, but concluded that Korean anti-Americanism is "unusual, genuine, persistent, intense, contradictory to Korea's national interest, and therefore hardest [among the different national varieties] to understand."

We were told that anti-Americanism was the result of U.S. policy choices, international economic forces, ROK domestic political tactics, and the structure of the international system. We could blame democratization, globalization, Westernization, modernization, unipolarity, social mobility, the ROK media, Korea's Confucian heritage, and its patriarchal ways. In short, anti-Americanism is political, economic, cultural, historical, and psychological. It is the product of deep-rooted factors and trends, and triggered by specific incidents. One participant preferred the term "America-bashing" to anti-Americanism.

The most depressing analysis - offered by a Korean, no less - suggested that an anti-American attitude is an "inseparable part of the Korean national psyche." This commentator argued that this sentiment is an integral component of a Korean mentality that demands the existence of a "them" to mirror and unite the "us" of the Korean nation. Sometimes this tendency resembles "scapegoating," but even without specific events to set it off, the need for an external "other" to define "Korean-ness" means that some form of anti-Americanism will always be present.

Another long-time observer of the Peninsula (not a Korean) suggested that anti-Americanism was the outgrowth of the maturation of Korean democracy. It is easy to forget that anti-Americanism was practically illegal in Korea until only a few years ago; the National Security Law made criticism of the U.S. a potentially criminal action (Praise of North Korea is still illegal, although there is more open sympathy for the North since the historic June 2000 North-South summit). The political spectrum in South Korea has been extended to the left and, by this analysis, anti-Americanism is a perfectly natural response. The alliance has exacerbated the situation: the ability to think like or communicate with Americans has aided upward mobility in Korea, adding a class element to the mix.

Compounding the problem are the hothouse conditions of Korean democracy. In particular, the Korean people are not well served by the mass media. Criticisms include an unwillingness to provide context or all the facts, a readiness to take sides (and direction from the government or publishers - recall that in the aftermath of the Kim-Kim summit, South Korean newspaper publishers met North Korean leader Kim

Jong-il and pledged to tone down criticism of Pyongyang), and a tendency to make up facts and even entire interviews. The penetration of the Internet and its freewheeling media contributes to the unbalanced reporting.

The strains in the alliance have sparked some in Washington to demand the removal of U.S. forces from South Korea. More level-headed participants cautioned against over-reacting to Korean anger and assertiveness. Don't be afraid of differences between the two countries, they counseled. Respect disagreements. Don't be alarmed about changes in the relationship. Continue contacts and communications and ensure that they go two ways. Informing a partner is not enough; genuine consultations are required. Most important, take nothing for granted. (Curiously, a few months ago, the Pacific Forum co-hosted a meeting of young opinion leaders that focused on Japan-Korea relations; they reached similar conclusions.)

President-elect Roh Moo-hyun rode the tide of anti-Americanism to victory in last year's elections - some insist that the government manipulated the demonstrations to shore up his support; the virtual disappearance of anti-American protest after the election supports the cynics - and does not have the ties to the U.S. that his predecessors did. They maintain that he has the intelligence and political savvy to understand reality. They are confident the new president will move closer to the U.S. in the months ahead and strengthen ties between the two allies. That process has already begun: Roh visited the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command after his election win and reaffirmed the U.S.-ROK alliance in the current situation and even after unification.

Those are welcome moves, but the wedge dividing the U.S. and South Korea cannot be dislodged by one man - whether he occupies the Blue House or the White House. Supporters of the alliance in both countries need to work harder to make their case to each public. I recommend they start with a similar conference on anti-Americanism in Seoul.

Koreans aren't ready to turn their back on the alliance. Opinion polls taken at the height of the anti-U.S. protests in December showed a majority of Koreans (54.8 percent) wanted U.S. troops to stay in Korea, even though that figure has been shrinking; less than a third (31.7 percent) wanted them out (and that number is growing). Koreans want a recalibration of the alliance; finding the right new balance is the essential task in the months and years ahead.

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