

Breaking the frame by Spencer Kim

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For decades there have been basically two frames of reference in South Korea — the conservative world view and the progressive world view. There was a certain tribalism mentality in that conservatives or progressives felt the need to subscribe to their “list” of beliefs, or at least defend them from attack by the other side. There were national leaders who pretty much followed the belief list down the line, and there were others who were more flexible in curtailing policies that proved to be counterproductive (see especially Roh Tae-woo and Kim Dae-jung) but by and large the conservative-progressive fault line endured.

Both conservatives and progressives were, however, united in the ultimate goal of building a Korea that would be strong enough to never again be exploited by a stronger power, as Korea was by Japan in its colonial period.

The events of the past year have shaken those standing frames of reference. What is emerging is a new, more sophisticated synthesis, one which could be a catalyst for subsuming the North Korean nuclear issue into a broader Northeast Asia security architecture.

The thesis of the conservative worldview was that North Korea presented an existential threat, both militarily and ideologically. A strong national defense was necessary as well as a strong counter to North Korean propaganda, which could appeal, especially, to youth susceptible to its nationalist message.

The US alliance was the underpinning of national defense, providing nearly an unlimited reserve force against the North and providing a subsidy to Korean defense through expensive naval, air, intelligence, and command/control assets. US forces must be accommodated, and anchored, in country. The “slippery slope” of US disengagement was to be avoided.

Economically, the country must industrialize and rapidly develop an export economy. Education must be emphasized, technology harnessed to industrialization, and labor costs should be kept reasonable, through suppression of labor agitation if necessary. Large conglomerates were seen as the most expedient and rapid way to grow the economy. Easy credit to large firms, interlocking ownerships, and the use of connections to skirt regulation were seen as necessary even if sometimes damaging to transparency and strict the rule of law. Some corruption was acceptable as the price of doing business as long as the overall system ran smoothly and economic

development was not adversely affected. However, there was also a pride in Korea’s adherence to the forms — and as much of the reality as possible — of a liberal democratic form of government.

Because the conservative power structure ruled for most of the post-Korean War era, conservatives had access to more resources for education, especially overseas education, and, correspondingly, English language skills. Consequently, conservative viewpoints were most effectively transmitted to US opinion makers.

The antithetical progressive view was that, while North Korea was a threat to be guarded against, its brotherly “Koreanness” could be a basis for engagement. Its ideology was abhorrent enough that it offered little competition for Southern minds and an attempt needed to be made to understand the North. While industrialization and economic development were important, so were human and labor rights. Democratization was an ultimate goal that was unnecessarily delayed by the authoritarianism used to subsume freedom to economic growth. The US alliance was seen as the bedrock of Korea’s security, but there was a feeling that the alliance also served US geopolitical goals and was not fragile; the alliance was as important to the US as to Korea. The US often took advantage of Korea in the relationship, causing insults to national pride. The US alliance could also complicate a growing relationship with China. The connections and corruption of the elites caused the common man to suffer and the benefits of social mobility were often denied him.

The progressive worldview was often distorted in the US by the better access of conservative voices, with progressives often labeled as pro-communist sympathizers, naive dupes of the North, or following a radical socialist economic policy, although in reality they were much closer to the middle of the political spectrum by US standards.

The events of the last year have shaken Korea. The corruption of the Park Geun-hye administration was particularly grotesque in the way it rubbed the most sensitive raw nerves of what Koreans feel is wrong with their society. Connections, arrogance, illicit funds, extortion, and incompetent authoritarianism, combined with the economic uneasiness and impotence against the “system” felt by many Koreans, played a role in generating the mass demonstrations that forced the constitutional system to impeach Park.

That led to the election of Moon Jae-in, who is promising, if one looks closely at his speeches, pronouncements and appointments, not just a switch from a conservative Park administration to a progressive Moon administration, but the creation of a new policy direction that captures elements of both worldviews into a new, synthesized set of policies. Moon was defeated in the December 2012 presidential election. Realizing he may run again, he spent four years in self-

reflection, information gathering, outreach to Koreans of all stripes, and analysis. He has approval ratings in the 80+ range because what he is saying and doing resonates with what Koreans innately recognize as their country's problems.

Politically, Moon is arguing that policies have to be arrived at transparently to get maximum buy-in from the populace. The concept of a steering elite has to be ended. The sense of powerless alienation by youth must be reversed.

Economically, the conglomerates should not be dismantled but streamlined and small- and medium-sized enterprises should be given better, and fairer, access to financing. The government should stimulate employment in order to generate a greater domestic economic driver.

But most importantly, Moon believes the US-ROK alliance is the bedrock of Korea's national security. It provides a reliable ally to give Korea more security in a region where it is small relative to its neighbors; it is not just an alliance against North Korea. But for the alliance to be healthy over the long run, and enjoy the support of the populace, it cannot appear to subjugate legitimate Korean interests.

How this plays out in the immediate issues of the day is that on the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system, Moon senses that most Koreans feel that THAAD was somehow a "middle of the night secret deal" between the US and the Park administration that was typical of Park's authoritarian and arrogant style — for which Korea paid a price when China reacted with vicious economic retaliation. He needs to cleanse THAAD by running it through the transparency machine and make it acceptable to the Korean populace. (And he needs time to deal with the Chinese reaction.)

On the North Korean nuclear issue, Moon sees the existential threat but wants to play the long game in removing it. Short-term pressure is necessary to make the price that Pyongyang pays clear, but using the crisis to generate momentum to a regional security architecture is the ultimate goal. If North Korea's security concerns can be met, and South Korea's security heightened by a system that locks the two Koreas, China, Russia, Japan, and the US into a stable multilateral dynamic, then inter-Korean engagement can also start to move Seoul and Pyongyang toward a modus vivendi that can reap security and economic benefits, and probably improve human rights in North Korea.

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