



## A Capital Idea to Move the Capital? by Aidan Foster-Carter

What does South Korea's president, Roh Moo-hyun, regard as "the most important task facing the nation" at this juncture? He has plenty to choose from. De-fanging North Korea, of nukes and more, surely tops anyone's list. Or relatedly, handling increasingly tetchy ties with the United States – whose new plan to withdraw one-third of its 37,000 troops from the Korean Peninsula by end-2005 means Roh's avowed quest for a more independent defense stance had better get into gear, fast.

Then there's the economy. How to get consumers spending again, after being burned in the recent credit card debt crunch? Or longer term (but the clock is ticking): How to beat off Chinese competition and make the tough leap into services and top-end manufacture? All these are weighty tasks and more than enough to keep South Korea's newly restored leader occupied for the four more years in office that the Constitutional Court's rejection in May of an opposition impeachment motion has vouchsafed to him.

But Roh has other priorities. For him, "the most important task facing the nation is to ensure regional uniformity through decentralization." Forget Kim Jong-il; never mind the economy. The real problem is Seoul. It's gotten way too big for its boots.

A political outsider who plays up his provincial underdog roots, Roh wants a more equal South Korea, be it socially, or between regions. To this end, he plans to move the capital. By 2012, the whole government – the Blue House, National Assembly, supreme court, all ministries – is to relocate some 100 kilometers south. Four towns in the Chungchong region are vying to become the new Seoul.

This won't come cheap. Roh's airy first figure of \$4 billion, when he campaigned for this shift in 2002, has since ballooned 10-fold – officially. Independent critics reckon the real bill could top \$100 billion. No one really knows: with no site yet, there are no blueprints.

Nor have there been any public hearings or consultation exercises for so vast a change. In his campaign Roh pledged a referendum – but is now backtracking, saying parliamentary approval suffices. That came last December, when the opposition Grand National Party (GNP), which then controlled the assembly, backed the bill – pressed, it now admits, by its Chungchong legislators, who feared losing their seats if the party opposed it. In the event, Chungchong votes were crucial in Roh's narrow win. (Is that smell pork-barrel?)

True, Seoul has long been likened to a vortex relentlessly sucking resources to the center. Greater Seoul, including Kyonggi province and Incheon port, is home to 40 percent of South Korea's 48 million people. But as this sprawl spreads,

one fear is that Chungchong is too close – and would merely become the southern tip of a vast lozenge-shaped megalopolis.

At least four questions arise. One is how shifting the capital meshes with other policies. The slogan of making Korea East Asia's business hub is hard to pin down, but its major manifestation so far – New Songdo City, a planned \$190-billion regeneration project near Incheon – involves heading west, not south. Nearby Incheon International Airport is already a long haul from downtown Seoul; it would be a whole lot further from Chungchong.

Second, can South Korea really afford this? Surging growth and fiscal discipline have left public finances healthy – for now. But many calls on the exchequer loom: \$103 billion to compensate farmers for market opening; \$21 billion extra on defense in the next decade to make up for the U.S. force drawdown; a pension system that will go bust without more infusions; and above all, the trillion-dollar question of eventual Korean reunification.

Whereby hangs a third objection. Seoul's Mayor Lee Myung Bak – a potential GNP presidential contender in 2007 – is clearly no neutral. Yet it's hard to disagree when he notes that come unification – "not so far away," in his view – a capital south from Seoul would be politically absurd. Since the northern economy will need boosting, it makes more sense to build a new capital in the old North.

All this apart, Roh's stated motive is itself misconceived. "Uniformity," as a professed goal, is as depressing as it is utopian – so last century, so Korean. All development is unequal, but South Korea's has in fact been more egalitarian than most. Yet that cuts little ice with Koreans; many itch to hammer any nail that sticks out. Inequality? Look at China, India, Brazil, the U.S. – or North Korea, whose regions are ripped off so a small elite can lord it in a Potemkin Pyongyang.

Vox populi? Public opinion is predictably split. Chungchong is keen (surprise!), while Seoul, Kyonggi and Incheon are all lobbying hard against the move. Nationwide, pros and cons each have around 40 percent support – but 70 percent there should be a referendum first.

Despite denying one now, a referendum may be Roh Moo-Hyun's best way forward – or way out. Otherwise, his not-so-capital idea threatens to become yet another long-running bone of contention in an already divided society – and a big distraction from South Korea's real security and economic challenges.

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