Irreconcilable Differences? Realism and Idealism in Cold War Korean-American Relations*

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Abstract
Anti-Americanism never should have emerged as a major force in South Korea. After all, Washington was responsible for the creation of the Republic of Korea in August 1948 and provided major support against North Korea during and after the Korean War. After 9/11, however, American failure to balance means and ends in the pursuit of realistic goals caused anti-Americanism to reach a crescendo because it revived with a new ferocity at least four historical factors: (1) American disregard for Korea and Korean incomprehension of American priorities; (2) American support for Korean military dictatorship; (3) United States military presence in Korea and refusal to deal with incidents of military misconduct in ways that appeared just to Koreans; and (4) American racism. Koreans, however, also do not understand that their nation is not the center of American priorities and expect more from the relationship than Americans are likely to provide. This article traces the development of these factors through the postwar period and the impact of Bush administration unilateralism.

Keywords
Realism, idealism, anti-Americanism, U.S.-Korea relations, Republic of Korea, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Sunshine Policy, George W. Bush

In 1964, Norman A. Graebner wrote that “national leaders must distinguish between the essential interests of the nation, upon which hinge its security and welfare, and demands of secondary importance, which are always

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proper questions for negotiation and compromise.”¹ For more than a century, this realist approach provided the foundation for United States relations with Korea. Elsewhere in the world, U.S. leaders at times promoted democracy and national self-determination, but never on the Korean peninsula when doing so conflicted with advancing its political, economic, and security interests. American self-interest made sense to American leaders, but the results frequently has enraged Koreans. This anger, however, is partially self-generated – Koreans historically have found it difficult to understand why the United States has not made Korea a top priority in its foreign affairs.

Lloyd Gardner once remarked that for Americans, “Korea was always about someplace else.”² Both realism and idealism, as the following pages will demonstrate, will fail in the absence of prudence and particular knowledge. Their failures, however, provide explanations for the emergence and persistence of anti-Americanism as a negative force in U.S.-Korean relations. After the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 11 September 2001, the United States initiated a “War on Terrorism.” Just four months later, President George W. Bush in his State of the Union address on 29 January 2002 linked the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) with terrorism, declaring that it was a member of an “Axis of Evil” that included Iran and Iraq.³ His remarks infuriated political leaders and most average citizens in South Korea because the public statement of hostility toward North Korea contradicted President Kim Dae-jung’s “Sunshine Policy” of seeking reconciliation and engagement with the DPRK.⁴ In defending his decision, the new president explained that Pyongyang could not be trusted because it was not fulfilling its agreements. His reference evidently was to the Agreed Framework that former President Jimmy Carter had negotiated in 1994, providing for the DPRK to halt its nuclear weapons program in return for multinational funding to build two nuclear-powered electricity plants that did not produce

⁴ Chung-in Moon, “Between Banmi (Anti-Americanism) and Sangmi (Worship of the United States): Dynamics of Changing U.S. Images in South Korea,” in Korean Attitudes Toward the United States, 149.
weapons-grade waste. Contrary to Bush’s claim, however, all available evidence indicated that Pyongyang was complying with its terms. As always, Korea policy was not about Korea.

Disregarding the desires of the Korean people certainly was nothing new, but the motivation was. Idealism now fueled an extremism that not only frightened South Korea, but also abandoned a realist approach that had dominated U.S. Korea policy for more than a century. For example, the United States intervened in the Korean War not so much to protect South Korea’s people or its alleged democracy as to signal the Soviet Union that it would not permit Communist conquest of additional territory anywhere in the world. Again, Korea policy was not about Korea.

Nevertheless, the Republic of Korea (ROK) became a devoted American ally because the economic and security interests of the two nations then coincided. Older South Koreans remain greatly appreciative to American soldiers for preventing a Communist military victory and they admire and respect U.S. political, social, and economic achievements. While embracing American values and popular culture, South Koreans born after the war ended in July 1953 more often rejected U.S. policy in the Cold War because they saw it as blocking reunification of their country. Early in the twenty-first century, Bush infuriated younger South Koreans when he rejected this realist approach of seeking engagement with North Korea. But older Koreans also had reasons for being disappointed with the United States because of its history of sacrificing Korea’s interests to larger goals.

Sources of Korean Anti-Americanism

U.S. realism in relations with Korea has created at least four explanations for persistent anti-Americanism.


American Disregard and Korean Incomprehension

The United States historically injured Korea largely because its leaders never made much of an effort to learn about Korean history or culture. Ironically, in 1882, the United States was the first Western nation to sign a treaty with Korea, including a pledge to exert “good offices” in the event that “other powers” dealt oppressively with either side. When the Japanese annexed Korea, however, President Theodore Roosevelt realized that he could do little to preserve Korea's freedom. The Taft-Katsura Agreement of 1905 acknowledged Japanese hegemony in return for Japan's acceptance of American domination over the Philippines. Roosevelt's decision to ignore U.S. treaty obligations, though legally indefensible, was realistic because he judged this distant Asian peninsula neither politically nor economically vital. Korean nationalist leaders, however, angrily denounced Roosevelt for an unforgivable act of betrayal. Koreans today no longer blame the United States for acquiescing in Japan's annexation. Instead, they believe that Roosevelt authorized Japanese conquest of Korea.7

President Woodrow Wilson's refusal at the Versailles Conference after World War I to act on his idealistic rhetoric and demand the restoration of Korea's sovereignty only deepened the feeling of bitterness and betrayal among the Korean people. Consequently, when the United States declared war on Japan in December 1941, Koreans expected President Franklin D. Roosevelt to announce Korea's independence as a major war aim. Unfortunately, Japan's defeat would bring not Korea's liberation, but military occupation and artificial division. Koreans never have forgiven the United States for dividing their country in 1945 and indeed blame the Truman administration for Korea's partition.8 Adding insult to injury, the United States then provided to Japan special economic opportunities and security protection. As Kent D. Calder has written, the ROK “found itself

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on the front line, in defense of a Japan-centric system dominated by its former colonial master.”9 Washington then pressed Seoul relentlessly to reconcile with Tokyo to contain Communist expansion in Northeast Asia. Not until 1965 did President Pak Chung-hui sign a treaty with Japan to secure major U.S. aid and expand trade to promote economic development.10

An idealistic nationalism still reigns. Most Koreans dismiss the reality that national division and American hegemony was the only alternative to a united Korea under Communist rule. U.S. actions during the occupation of southern Korea only provided additional reasons for anger over American insensitivity. For example, the U.S. Army Forces in Korea (USAFIK) established its headquarters at Yongsan near central Seoul, the same place where the Japanese Army located its main military base in 1894. Bruce Cumings points out that the commander of the occupation established his residence in the executive mansion of the former Japanese governor-general.11

Most Koreans in the immediate aftermath of independence favored sweeping economic, political, and social reforms. There also were widespread popular calls for punishment of Koreans who had collaborated with the Japanese and profited from colonial rule. In the north, Soviet policies addressed the desires of the masses. By contrast, the U.S. military government employed collaborators, relied for advice on wealthy conservatives, suppressed Communist and leftist politicians, and delayed reforms. In August 1948, the United States restored sovereignty to the ROK under President Syngman Rhee, a ruthless politician and rightwing dictator.12

Many South Koreans view U.S. military withdrawal from Korea in June 1949 as an act of abandonment that invited the North Korean invasion exactly one year later. A source of particular anger is the speech Secretary of State Dean Acheson delivered to the National Press Club on 12 January

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1950. In it, he placed South Korea outside the U.S. defensive perimeter in Asia. South Koreans continue to believe that this speech gave the North Koreans a “green light” to invade the ROK on 25 June 1950. In fact, as Soviet documents recently have revealed, Acheson’s words had almost no effect on Communist planning for the invasion, not least because only one even mentions the Press Club speech. For many, the Korean armistice was a mistake. Older Koreans in particular have had no trouble insisting that an attempt to achieve Korea’s reunification was worth the risk of another world war.

The favorable postwar image of the United States as the nation in Korean affairs was consistent with the traditional Asian view of foreign relations. In the Korean language, the word sadae describes a relationship between two countries reflecting the Confucian family system in which the younger brother served his older brother, while the “senior” brother recognized a duty to provide help and guidance to his “junior.” More recently, David I. Steinberg writes, “that phrase has been applied to relations with the United States, but the connotation has shifted dramatically and negatively; it is now often translated as ‘flunkyism.’” For the so-called 3-8-6 generation (thirty-somethings, born in the 1960s who went to college in the 1980s) in South Korea, American hypocrisy removed long ago any reason to respect the United States. In their youth as militant students, burning the U.S. flag, carrying banners denouncing the United States, and chanting anti-American slogans became standard features at demonstrations regardless of the issue.

16 Cha, “Anti-Americanism and the U.S. Role,” 131; Steinberg, “Introduction,” xvii, xxxii. This pattern of displaying anti-Americanism through random acts of violence was made clear to me during my visit to South Korea in June 1988. Just hours before I was to meet with Ambassador James Lilley, seven student dissidents – the “Patriotic Command Team” – attacked the U.S. embassy with homemade noise bombs. Five jumped the wall and entered the compound carrying a placard declaring “Drive Out U.S. Imperialists Who Masterminded
Support for Military Dictatorships

Washington’s support for military dictatorship arguably created the most hostility. Some South Koreans believe that the Central Intelligence Agency was complicit in General Pak Chong-hui’s overthrow of the democratically elected government under Prime Minister Chang Myon in May 1961. Thereafter, Washington provided $12.5 billion in military and economic aid that helped keep Pak in power. From the American viewpoint, U.S. tolerance for eighteen years of the dictatorial regime was not difficult to understand since Pak brought political stability to the ROK. Moreover, his leadership in the economic field transformed South Korea into an economic powerhouse. At the time of Pak’s assassination in October 1979, the United States no longer had to consider the ROK a financial burden dependent for its very survival on U.S. aid. But from a South Korean perspective, U.S. backing for Pak was indefensible. The United States, critics charged, purposefully sought to perpetuate military rule. President Jimmy Carter was sensitive to these complaints. To promote democratic reform following Pak’s murder, he suspended economic development talks with Seoul and persuaded the Asian Development Bank to halt plans for loans to South Korea. These acts forced the new government under Chun Du-hwan to lift martial law and commute the death sentence imposed on dissident leader Kim Dae-jung.17

Ronald Reagan’s election as president in 1980 signaled an end to what had been a brief, aberrant period in U.S. policy toward South Korea. For most of the next decade, Washington’s main concern was maintaining stability in the ROK rather than promoting progress toward democracy. For example, Chun Du-hwan was the first head of state to visit President Reagan after his inauguration. As one American official declared at the time, “security is the uppermost element in our minds. … It’s not the intention of this administration to go into the internal state of affairs in the ROK.”18


But persistent U.S. indifference about advancing democratic principles set the stage for the Kwangju Incident, the most incendiary issue fueling extreme anti-Americanism in South Korea. In May 1980, Chun ordered a detachment of ROK special forces to the southwestern city of Kwangju to suppress anti-government protests against the imposition of martial law. In the violence that followed, South Korean troops killed about two hundred people. Dissenters immediately blamed the United States for the killings, pointing to the fact that under an agreement dating from the Korean War, ROK troops were under U.S. operational control. If the United States was not complicit, U.S. approval for the Chun government’s request to release the troops meant that at least it was indirectly responsible. Speaking for many South Koreans, one observer explained that “you don't have to pull the trigger to be responsible for a crime.” Young South Koreans still believe the United States “master-minded” the “Kwangju Incident” as part of its policy to strengthen authoritarianism.

For the United States, this anti-Americanism was not only irrational, but naïve because it weakened the U.S.-ROK alliance vital for the preservation of peace in Northeast Asia. However, Washington’s priority on security in the Cold War, rather than fostering democracy, was precisely what infuriated so many South Koreans. The 3-6-8 generation, Steinberg explains, denies that “a mutuality of interests” between Seoul and Washington can exist because “the United States has acted in South Korea in terms of its own national and individual interests.” After 1980, this clash between American realism and Korean idealism explained why the two most emotional issues sustaining anti-Americanism in the ROK were the perceived responsibility of the United States for perpetuating Korea’s division and the Kwangju Incident. While older South Koreans remained

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20 Steinberg, “Conclusion,” 332; Kim and Park, “Perception of American People, Society, and Influence,” 250. According to William M. Drennan, by “making security and stability, rather than democratization and human rights, the foundation of its South Korea policy, the United States was guilty of nothing more than prioritizing among equally important but – at least in the short run – incompatible goals, given political conditions on the peninsula.” Drennan, “Tipping Point,” 299.
worried about the ROK’s vulnerability and feared U.S. abandonment, young South Koreans without any memory of the Korean War were gaining increasing pride and self-confidence in response to economic productivity and prosperity in South Korea. During the 1980s and 1990s, many South Koreans naturally came to resent U.S. pressure to open Korea’s markets to American goods, especially beef, cigarettes, and automobiles. Perceived unfairness along with unfulfilled expectations motivated idealistic young South Koreans view the U.S.-ROK alliance as worthless.21

A turning point for South Korean anti-Americanism came in June 1987. That summer, mass public demonstrations demanding democracy resulted in the adoption of a new constitution that provided for popular election of the president. These events marked a watershed in the political history of South Korea, leading to the end of military rule in the ROK. Many South Koreans still believe, however, that the U.S. government was responsible for delaying the death of dictatorship. This turning point also fixed in place the dual and contradictory image of the United States – Mi-guk in Korean – that has prevailed among South Koreans for over a half-century. For older Koreans, the United States remains “the beautiful nation” – a translation of Mi-guk using a Chinese character for “beautiful.” But younger Koreans in the 1980s, especially students and academics who resented U.S. infringements on national sovereignty, advanced a new meaning for Mi-guk using a different Chinese character for mi – the “rat tail nation” or more precisely “buttocks nation.”22 The hostility grew from the fundamental belief that the United States was an imperialist nation driven by a capitalist system bent on global economic domination and military aggression. Known as banmi (anti-Americanism), it draws power from the anger of young South Koreans over the prolonged U.S. support for military dictatorship and their belief that American troops have prevented reunification with the north.

21 Kim Jinwung, “South Korean Anti-Americanism,” in James I. Matray, ed., East Asia and the United States: An Encyclopedia of Relations Since 1784 (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002), 2:568; Steinberg, “Conclusion,” 331. In 1988, a survey of 1,000 South Koreans found that 46.6 percent named U.S. trade pressure on the ROK, especially to open the agricultural market, as the main source of anti-Americanism, with the Kwangju Incident at 27.7 percent, behavior of American athletes during the Seoul Olympics at 8.4 percent, and presence of U.S. troops at 3.9 percent. Moon, “Between Banmi and Sangmi,” 143.

Its visceral hostility to the United States differs from the critical yet supportive bami anti-Americanism.\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{United States Military Presence in Korea}

Progress toward democracy after 1987 shifted the focus of animosity toward the United States in South Korea. In place of criticizing Washington's perceived partnership with military dictatorship, dissidents began to concentrate on protesting the presence of U.S. forces. For more than a generation after the Korean War ended in 1953, South Koreans generally accepted the necessity of retaining U.S. combat forces in Korea. For the United States, a permanent U.S. military presence on the peninsula was vital for preservation of peace and stability in Northeast Asia, explaining the continued deployment of 37,000 American soldiers in Korea at the start of the twenty-first century. But beginning in the 1980s, a growing number of South Koreans not only doubted that renewed war was probable, but refused to believe Washington's promise to comply with a South Korean request for military withdrawal. More important, a poll of university students in 1988 revealed that nearly half thought that the presence of U.S. forces had made “the division of Korea permanent.” Adding power to this belief was the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall. During 1990, Germany’s preparations for reunification convinced many South Koreans that their divided country would follow suit in short order. Indeed, early in the 1970s, both Koreas had advanced proposals leading toward reconciliation and future reunification. The DPRK's consistent position had been that there could be no positive movement in negotiations, however, until U.S. troops withdrew from the peninsula.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{23} Moon, “Between Banni and Sangmi,” 139-43. Victor D. Cha contends that anti-Americanism is “a product of the development and democratization of South Korea. It reflects the emergence of a young, affluent generation that is educated and views quality-of-life issues – such as the environment, labor, and rule of law – as critical to the national agenda.” Predictably, this generation stands in opposition to “more anachronistic aspects of a Cold War alliance that puts a major foreign military presence in the heart of the host nation's capital city. In this sense, South Korean complaints represent growing pains within the alliance as the junior partner matures rather than a permanent fissure in the relationship.” Cha, “Anti-Americanism and the U.S. Role,” 131.

\textsuperscript{24} James I. Matray, “Ending a Nightmare: Korea’s Quest for Reunification,” SHAFR Newsletter, 23 (December 1991), 22, 25. See also, Hahm, “Anti-Americanism, Korean Style,” 226.
When the two Korean prime ministers met for the first time in Seoul early in September 1990, there were some areas of agreement. Both sides accepted proposals for a public declaration of non-aggression, the removal of all military equipment from the demilitarized zone, installation of hot-lines between military commands, and an end to slander and vilification in public pronouncements. But for South Koreans, the absence of real progress toward achieving reunification during 1990 was not just disappointing, as it came as something of a surprise. In their search for an explanation for this failure to achieve political amalgamation, many once again pointed an accusing finger at the United States. A poll at that time found that nearly half of all South Korean university students saw the United States as “the greatest impediment to Korea’s reunification.” Since all Koreans wanted national unity desperately, U.S. domination provided a simple and persuasive explanation, as it had in the past, for Korea’s ongoing tragedy. Furthermore, in sharp contrast to the United States, the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) began late in 1990 to apply diplomatic and economic pressure on the DPRK to make concessions that would lead toward cooperative relations with the ROK. This accelerated the reconciliation process, as the two Koreas agreed in February 1991 on procedures for fielding joint table tennis and soccer teams to participate in international competitions in Japan and Portugal, respectively.25

Significantly, Pyongyang applied for admission to the United Nations in May 1991, abandoning its longstanding insistence upon sharing a single seat with Seoul. On 9 August, the U.N. Security Council approved the applications of the DPRK and ROK for admission. South Korea’s government was jubilant. One ROK official predicted that U.N. membership for both Koreas would “cement peace and ensure stability.” On 17 September 1991, expectations for an early end to the artificial division of the peninsula were on the rise when North and South Korea formally joined the United Nations, as its 160th and 161st members, respectively. Seoul insisted that like Germany, seating both Koreas in the world body would not prevent but shorten the time necessary to achieve reunification. Shortly thereafter, Pyongyang and Seoul agreed to resume the adjourned prime ministers meetings, as students from both Koreas met in the demilitarized zone to hug and sing unification songs. By then, however, evidence that the DPRK soon would be

25 Matray, “Korea’s Quest for Disarmament and Reunification,” 241-42, 244-45. See also, Meredith Woo-Cumings, “Unilateralism and Its Discontents: The Passing of the Cold War Alliance and Changing Public Opinion in the Republic of Korea,” in Korean Attitudes Toward the United States, 75-76.
able to produce nuclear weapons had arisen as a new barrier to reconciliation. At the talks, the ROK's prime minister reaffirmed that there were no nuclear weapons in South Korea. If Pyongyang permitted inspections in North Korea, Seoul would allow the DPRK to inspect military and civilian installations in South Korea. In response, North Korea's prime minister complained about pressure for “forced inspections.”

Surprising most observers, on 13 December, the Korean prime ministers signed the “Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, Exchange and Cooperation.” Under its terms, the two Koreas renounced the use of armed force or acts of terrorism against one another, as well as efforts to overthrow either side's government. They pledged as well to restore phone and mail service, promote economic exchange, reunite separated families, rebuild rail lines and roads across the demilitarized zone, and establish within five months a Joint Military Commission and hotlines between military commanders. The prime ministers stopped short of calling this a peace treaty, noting that the Korean War would not end formally until a permanent accord replaced the armistice agreement. Still, as one ROK official remarked, the treaty was a “historical milestone and an evolution in inter-Korean relations” and the first step toward reunification. Meanwhile, Washington was expressing anxieties to Seoul about the excessive speed of the process, angering President No Tae-u and most South Koreans. After supporting the desire of the German people for reunification, the United States was refusing to help the Korean people realize the same dream. A decade later, Korea remained divided, causing an increasing number of South Koreans to blame the absence of reunification on the U.S. presence in the ROK. In May 2003, Jung Hyun-sun, a 24-year-old store employee, wearing hip-hop clothes and an earring, stated the case succinctly: “They are actually ruling South Korea with the excuse that they are protecting us.”

A flashpoint for anti-Americanism directly linked to the U.S. military presence in South Korea has been the U.S.-ROK Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). This document, which outlines terms for judicial treatment of American servicemen in the ROK, is widely seen as a typical symbol of how the United States demeans South Korea as an inferior. Under the original SOFA, signed on 9 July 1966, the ROK as a sovereign nation had control

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“with respect to such matters as facilities used by U.S. forces, entry and exit of U.S. personnel, custom/taxation, criminal jurisdiction, claims payments by the United States, [and U.S.] employment of Korean citizens. It also had “jurisdiction over members of the United States armed forces or civilian component, and their dependents, with respect to [criminal] offenses, except during hostilities and martial law.” This seemingly fair agreement, however, placed restrictions on South Korea’s authority, stipulating that the United States “shall have jurisdiction” unless the Korean government “determines in a specific case that it is of particular importance that [ROK] jurisdiction be exercised therein.” U.S. military authorities have emphasized that South Korea’s SOFA was pragmatic, realistic, and basically the same as similar agreements that the United States had with Japan, the Philippines, and all North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) nations. But South Korean critics countered that the ROK had far less favorable standards of equality, insisting that their government should exercise “full” criminal jurisdiction over American servicemen and their dependents.  

To remove the SOFA as a source of anti-Americanism, the United States agreed in December 1990 to eliminate the “automatic renunciation” clauses, thereby granting full jurisdiction over crimes that off-duty U.S. servicemen and their dependents committed. U.S. military authorities had jurisdiction over crimes by on-duty U.S. servicemen. Additionally, the ROK could restore the facilities and lands that the USAFIK had not used. Finally, the United States agreed to return nine air base sites to South Korea. Yet the ROK government still viewed the SOFA as unfair. It called for the right to take custody of a U.S. soldier charged with crimes against Koreans at the time of indictment, instead of at conviction, and the right to inspect U.S. military facilities for environmental contamination and to order U.S. forces to decontaminate polluted soil before its return to South Korea. On 28 December 2000, South Korea and the United States initialed a new SOFA that largely granted these changes.  

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Criminal jurisdiction over U.S. servicemen and their dependents still occasioned intense anti-Americanism. On 13 June 2002, an American soldier driving a 50-ton armored vehicle during a training exercise on a narrow road about twenty miles north of Seoul struck and killed two young schoolgirls. The accident occurred on the very day the South Korean soccer team beat Italy in the World Cup, spoiling a moment of unprecedented national triumph. Angry protesters burned American flags and scuffled with riot police. On 30 July, students stormed the U.S. Army’s Yongsan base, clashed with South Korean police, and “kicked and pummeled” three American soldiers. Protesters rejected as insincere a string of official U.S. government apologies because Washington refused to surrender the two accused American soldiers for trial in a civilian court on charges of negligent homicide, as the ROK government had requested.30

Acquittal of the two sergeants by a U.S. military court in November 2002 caused Washington to expect a new wave of angry demonstrations. In response, U.S. Ambassador Thomas Hubbard, at a press conference, stated that President Bush had telephoned him to say that he had been “touched by this tragedy” and asked the ambassador to express his “sadness and regret” over this tragic incident. With few exceptions, South Koreans considered the trials of the two U.S. soldiers a sham. They found it difficult to accept that no one would be punished for the killings. Under the ROK criminal justice system, conviction almost certainly would have meant imprisonment for the accused. This was just the reason for the United States to reject Seoul’s demands, but General Leon LaPorte, commander of U.S. forces in South Korea, stated that “we accept full responsibility for this tragic accident.”31

Anti-American activists were determined that “full responsibility” meant consequences. On 14 December 2002, roughly 50,000 South Koreans, carrying candles in mourning, attended a rally in front of Seoul City Hall to protest the acquittal of the two U.S. soldiers and demand their retrial in a South Korean court. Protest leaders dismissed as insufficient President Bush’s expression of regret over the deaths to President Kim Dae-jung in a private telephone conversation. “We cannot accept it as a direct apology to the Korean people,” Chae He-byong declared. “We demand him to apologize in the capacity of the U.S. president instead of whispering personal sadness

on the phone." A year after the accident, South Korean anger remained intense, as thousands planned a massive demonstration on 13 June 2003. But American officials searched in vain for satisfactory words to express their sorrow and confirm their dedication to preventing another similar tragedy.32 This was because for many South Koreans the mere presence of U.S. troops was a constant reminder of the racist U.S. attitudes and behavior toward Koreans. Common sense suggested that future incidents were certain in the absence of U.S. military withdrawal.

American Racism: Korean Perceptions and American Obstructionism

Countless South Koreans believe that U.S. officials see Korea as a dependent state and that American behavior reflects arrogance, racial superiority, and contempt. Anti-Americanism seemed a way to gain redress for the pattern of unfairness and discrimination in Korean-American relations. It seeks to remedy a traditional Korean sentiment known as han, a smoldering bitterness about past wrongs. American behavior during the 1988 Seoul Olympics energized this existing hostility. South Koreans took offense when American athletes, marching into Chamshil Stadium during the opening ceremonies, broke ranks and held up signs for the television cameras. South Koreans thought television coverage of the Olympics devoted too much attention to a defeated South Korean boxer’s refusal to leave the ring and a coach’s physical assault on a referee for alleged unfairness. They believed that there was detailed coverage of the PRC athletes’ records, but not a complete account of Korean achievements. Finally, South Koreans found especially humiliating coverage of sweatshops, prostitution, and foreign adoption of Korean children which had nothing to do with sports.33

By the late 1980s, hyommi or “loathing of the United States,” somehow went alongside an idealistic conviction that Korea should be the number one priority in U.S. national security planning. Most Koreans simply could not understand or accept as reasonable that U.S. Korea policy would be based on American self-interest. South Korean anti-American activists have attributed this not to pragmatism, but to malevolence. They have long argued that as early as the late nineteenth century the United States sought

to dominate Korea, following the advice of leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt who considered Koreans to be backward and inferior. A conviction that the United States has exploited Korea to serve its hegemonic designs has added emotional elements of anger and resentment to Korean nationalism. Unlike Germany, Meredith Woo-Cumings notes perceptively, “the violence imposed upon the Korean identity was not self-inflicted, nor was it accepted as the wage of its past folly and crime.” For many South Koreans, racist U.S. postwar policies made all Koreans “victims of a history not of their own making.”

Many South Koreans also have perceived racist condescension even in U.S. economic policy. From 1945 to 1965, U.S. spending in South Korea exceeded $12 billion with the high point in 1957, when the ROK received $383 million in economic aid, $400 million in military aid, and $300 million for costs of U.S. troops. Almost a decade later, average annual U.S. assistance to South Korea was more than $300 million. In 1965, the ROK received $185 million in economic aid, almost 9 percent of all U.S. foreign aid. With U.S. support, Pak Chong-hui's economic development programs ended this humiliating dependency relationship, but South Koreans soon concluded that the United States was unwilling to treat the ROK as an economic equal. During the 1980s, South Korea began to register trade surpluses with the United States. Constant conflict followed over trade reciprocity, especially regarding export of manufactured goods. Washington insisted that South Korea open its highly protected domestic market and accused it of dumping its goods into the United States. Refusing to submit to U.S. pressure, the ROK became an economic “Asian Tiger” with an average annual capita income in 1995 that topped $10,000. Self-confident economic nationalism peaked in July 1997 when a poll found that South Koreans did not want foreigners to own Korean land or businesses; an even larger number opposed them owning big parcels of land or businesses. That same year, however, the East Asian Financial Crisis arrived, bringing the contentious U.S.-ROK economic relationship to an apex of acrimony.

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United States reactions to the ROK's distress reaffirmed perceptions of a pattern of racist American neocolonialism. Before the Cold War ended, Washington had considered any serious economic crisis in South Korea as a security threat. Consequently, Seoul had come to expect Washington and Tokyo to provide help whenever it confronted economic instability, as was the case following the assassination of Pak Chong-hui in October 1979. But in November 1997, Washington informed a shocked Seoul that it would provide no assistance. Even more infuriating for South Koreans, when the ROK government asked the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for an emergency bridge loan, the United States successfully lobbied for the imposition of conditions to crack open the South Korean financial and commodities market.  

Seoul then satisfied Washington's demand that it replace "state-led growth with market transparency and accountability," but South Korea's economic crisis deepened because the United States refused to make explicit its firm support for the IMF deal that called for world governments to fund $20 billion of the loan package. Finally, Washington acted to persuade the ROK's creditors to reschedule existing debts as an alternative to default. Meanwhile, South Korea's economy sustained massive bankruptcies of large and small companies combined with a recession that contracted national income by 7 percent and reduced wages for the average worker by 10 percent.  

ROK President Kim Young-sam received much of the blame for the humiliation South Koreans suffered as a consequence of its economic meltdown in response to the East Asian Financial Crisis. Popular unhappiness with the ruling party would contribute to the election of dissident Kim Dae-jung as president late in 1997. Reflecting concerns about the staggering costs of rehabilitating the north after reunification, Kim Dae-jung adopted the "Sunshine Policy" of engagement with the DPRK. His plan not only to foster peace on the peninsula, but also to provide assistance to North Korea for economic development also satisfied a widespread desire to follow a foreign policy independent of the United States. South Korean radicals soon had difficulty finding an audience for anti-American appeals because the Clinton administration began to provide support and direct encouragement for the "Sunshine Policy."

But Korean sensitivity to American racism resurfaced in September 1999 when the Associated Press (AP) reported U.S. veterans' accounts that

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38 Ibid., 72-73; Cumings, “Structural Basis of Anti-Americanism,” 106.
during the first month of the Korean War, they had killed hundreds of innocent civilians at the village of No Gun Ri. South Koreans who had survived the massacre corroborated their stories. Moreover, the AP quoted U.S. military documents showing that these U.S. soldiers had acted on instructions to shoot refugees fleeing the carnage. Another damning revelation was that U.S. Army officers had ordered destruction of two strategic bridges in early August 1950 causing the deaths of hundreds of refugees streaming across the structures.39

Late in 1999, Hanchongryon, South Korea’s largest student group, organized demonstrations that drew thousands of protesters and revived its influence after years of declining popularity. But in the United States, veterans groups emphatically denied that any massacre had occurred. The United States and the ROK conducted a joint investigation of the No Gun Ri Incident, issuing a report in January 2001 that concluded the U.S. soldiers had “killed or injured an unconfirmed number of Korean refugees in the last week of July 1950 during a withdrawal under pressure.” But the U.S. government categorically rejected the allegation that the U.S. Army had issued orders to kill civilian refugees. It therefore refused to pay financial compensation to South Korean victims of the tragedy, requiring them or their families to file civil suits. U.S. President Bill Clinton worked hard to pacify dissatisfied South Koreans without infuriating U.S. veterans and rightwing politicians. On 11 January 2001, he issued a statement that “on behalf of the United States of America, I deeply regret that Korean civilians lost their lives at No Gun Ri.” Clinton did not apologize, but offered his “condolences” to families of the Koreans killed or injured in the incident. The United States also promised to build a monument as a “symbol of deep regret” for the innocent Korean civilians that American troops had killed during the Korean War. For most South Koreans, however, No Gun Ri had become “Korea’s My Lai.”40


40 New York Times, 16 Oct. 1999; “U.S. to Establish Nogunri Monument to Innocent S. Korean Victims,” People’s Daily, 12 Jan. 2001. Meredith Woo-Cumings emphasizes, however, that because the Clinton administration “was ready to accord some respect to a smaller ally and show willingness to manage conflicts before they got out of control, South Koreans did respond in kind, appropriately and predictably. And it is this mutual respect that went out the window in the period of unilateralism that was ushered in in 2001.” Woo-Cumings, “Unilateralism and Its Discontents,” 67-68.
The realistic U.S. policy meant that even the revelation of No Gun Ri did not inflame anti-Americanism in South Korea. It also explained decisions that provided enthusiastic support for the “Sunshine Policy.” For example, in September 1999, the Clinton administration announced partial lifting of economic sanctions against North Korea as a reward for the DPRK’s pledge to halt missile tests. In June 2000, Washington praised Kim Dae-jung’s historic meeting in Pyongyang with DPRK leader Kim Jong Il that resulted in the ROK president receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. Clinton’s actions in supporting South Korean foreign policy goals greatly mitigated South Korean anti-Americanism. A favorable view of the United States in the Korean public reached an “historic peak” of between 60 and 73 percent between 1996 and 2000.41

Unilateralism and Its Discontents: The War on Terror and the Generation Gap

Whatever progress the Clinton administration had made toward reducing South Korean anti-Americanism came to an abrupt end with the inauguration of George W. Bush as president. Shifting U.S. Korea policy from an emphasis on realism to idealism, the new administration rejected diplomatic contacts with a “rogue” North Korea. Bush also voiced displeasure with Kim Dae-jung after the ROK president in February 2001 joined Russian President Vladimir Putin in declaring his support for respecting the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.42 Reciprocal presidential visits over the next year failed to slow the emergence of irreconcilable policy differences in U.S.-ROK relations, let alone restore South Korean confidence and trust in the United States. When Bush arrived in Seoul on 19 February 2002, ROK riot police outside the U.S. military base at Yongsan fought with throngs of people, many carrying signs reading “No Bush, No War!” The day before, the “National Association of Bereaved Families of Civilians Killed Before and

After the Korean War” held an emergency press conference to read a statement that “Bush cannot set his foot in this land without a sincere apology and compensation for the massacres of one million civilians.”

Resumption of the North Korean nuclear crisis in October 2002 sparked a major increase in South Korean hostility toward the United States, especially because it came in the wake of the killing of the two schoolgirls. Washington’s policy of confronting Pyongyang touched every reason for anti-Americanism. No Mu-hyun, a fifty-seven year old labor lawyer and human rights activist, emerged as the candidate of Kim Dae-jung’s party in the 2002 presidential election after he pledged to resist U.S. dictation. His only power base outside the party was an Internet fan club that promoted him online. During the campaign, President Bush “expressed deep misgivings” about No Mu-hyun, transforming the underdog into an easy winner. On 19 December, it was largely voters in their twenties and thirties who elected No Mu-hyun president. “I should not say this here, but I hope North Korea has nuclear weapons,” Shim Wan-kyu, a 31-year-old financial worker, confessed later that month. “They won’t attack South Korea with it. It is not for attack, but for defense.”

Four months later, the United States invaded Iraq. A poll in June 2003 found that South Koreans disliked the United States more than citizens of any other U.S. ally. An astounding 58 percent voiced disappointment that

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Iraq had not staged more resistance to the United States, while only 24 supported the U.S. “War on Terrorism.” Yet the Bush administration still pressed the ROK to send thousands of combat troops to Iraq. At first, President No insisted that he would agree only when he was confident there would be a peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear weapons crisis. But young and liberal South Koreans opposed deploying ROK forces in Iraq under any circumstances.46

Meanwhile, these moves in the Middle East only raised popular anxieties in South Korea. No Mu-hyun's refusal to join the United States in provoking Pyongyang in February 2003 brought swift punishment, as Washington ignored ROK objections and announced plans to redeploy American troops from the demilitarized zone to south of Seoul, although it also provided $11 billion in military aid to support a disingenuous public explanation for this policy shift. U.S. officials insisted that these steps would enhance security, but many South Koreans had good reason to believe that Washington wanted to remove the threat of artillery retaliation on U.S. forces after it staged a planned preemptive attack on DPRK nuclear facilities.47 The United States pressed the United Nations to take action to end the North Korean nuclear weapons program while South Korea concentrated on achieving cooperation and reconciliation. Meanwhile, ROK and DPRK negotiators during February talks in Seoul had made progress on plans to build an industrial park in the north and connect two inter-Korean railways. That same month, civic groups in South Korea were arranging anti-war rallies, protesting a possible U.S.-led war on Iraq, and demanding a peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear dispute. Civil leaders of the two Koreas also were planning for the first time to hold joint celebrations marking the anniversary of the 1919 March First protest against Japanese colonial rule.48

On 1 March, two large demonstrations dramatized a deep generational gap. The first provided evidence that chinmi or pro-American sentiment in the ROK was still widespread. At noon in front of Seoul City Hall, an estimated 100,000 people attended a huge pro-American, anti-North Korean

46 Steinberg, “Introduction,” xix; New York Times, 26 and 29 Sept. 2003. Revealing the extraordinary shift in public attitudes in the ROK, an opinion poll in 1965 found that only 1 percent of South Koreans disliked the United States, while 68 percent chose it as their favorite country. Choi, “Anti-Americanism or ‘Anti-Baseism,’” 310.
gathering. Five hours later, thousands of young people joined in a second protest march, from the site of the 1919 March First demonstration to near the U.S. embassy, where they sang anti-American songs and voiced sympathy for North Korea in interviews. “Older people have lived in times in which they got a lot of pressure from America and toward Americanism and militarism and obedience,” explained Pak Yong-jun, a 27-year-old office worker holding a sign calling for an end to all wars. But both sides agreed that changes in the South Korean educational system had contributed to widespread negative views of the United States. For example, students did not learn about the U.S. role in ending Japanese colonial rule or in halting the North Korean invasion. During the spring, South Korean efforts at reconciliation continued, worsening relations with the United States. On 15 June, hundreds of people gathered at the final stop before the DPRK border on the newly built railroad linking North and South Korea to pray, shout, and sing for peace. “We are afraid President Bush will start a war against North Korea the same as in Iraq,” declared Kim Kyong-min, one of the organizers of the officially sanctioned activity. “Our message is we want peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula.”

Just over a month later, South Koreans prepared to commemorate the fifty-year anniversary of the armistice that ended the Korean War. When New York Times reporter Norimitsu Onishi traveled to a fashion center of downtown Seoul, he was shocked to learn that the young South Koreans there had not heard of the celebrations marking the anniversary of the truce. In South Korean schools, young people read textbooks that no longer made them distrustful of the DPRK. For Chae He-byong, the 37-year-old chairman of the “Pan-Korean Committee on the Girls Killed by U.S. Armored Vehicles,” the United States had blocked replacing the armistice with a peace treaty because a continuing state of war allowed it to keep troops on the peninsula to maintain hegemony in the region. “When we have had the chance for better relations with the North,” he insisted, “the United States has blocked it.” Onishi reported similar comments from young South

Koreans on a corner with a McDonald’s and Dunkin’ Donuts, and Billy Joel’s song “Uptown Girl” blaring out of a clothing store.⁵⁰

Unrealistic Realism and Unidealistic Idealism: The Weird Sisters

Anti-Americanism never should have emerged as a major force in South Korea. After all, Washington was responsible for the creation of the ROK in August 1948. For South Koreans of the Korean War generation, the U.S.-ROK partnership is “an alliance forged in blood.” Explaining the persistence of anti-Americanism was an idealism that came to dictate U.S. Korea policy after George W. Bush became president in January 2001. But to Americans, the hostility toward the United States that peaked in South Korea in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century seemed unfair, if not extreme and irrational. U.S. veterans visiting the ROK expressed dismay over South Korean criticism of the United States at the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Korean War armistice. Glen Davis, a 71-year-old from Paden, Oklahoma, was a U.S. Army medic stationed in Japan when the Korean War started. “We were so dumb,” he confessed. “We didn’t even know what North Korea or South Korea was. I didn’t know.” Many of these Americans veterans, visiting the ROK for the first time in decades, were distressed that a rising number of South Koreans regarded Washington as the source of the North Korean nuclear crisis more than Pyongyang. “It’s just perplexing,” Davis remarked, shaking his head. “It’s just puzzling to me that the young people would think that way. We’ve been here for 50 years keeping the peace. They’ve never really had it so good.”⁵¹

South Koreans, however, could no longer be certain about the U.S. commitment to peace. President Bush in his commencement address at West Point on 1 June 2002 justified this dramatic departure from a traditional emphasis on realism in U.S. Korea policy. New threats on the Korean peninsula and around the world, he declared, required the United States to adopt a new policy of “preemptive action”:

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Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies. ... Because the war on terror will require resolve and patience, it will also require firm moral purpose. ... Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place.52

For Bush, “evil” had a clear meaning, Bruce Cumings explains: “Some people or regimes are so beyond the pale that there can be no relationship with them; they should just go to hell, and the sooner the better.” But for Koreans, evil is not a moral category, but rather an intellectual one that should not create separation or division between human beings. Kim Dae-jung’s “Sunshine Policy” epitomizes this concept. “Although Koreans welcome the United States as a body of culture and civilization,” Moon Chung-in adds, “they often oppose the United States as a political entity wrapped in partisan ideology and interests.”53

By the summer of 2004, irreconcilable differences had firmly taken hold which plagued U.S.-ROK relations. Quietly ignoring pressure from the Bush administration to help isolate the DPRK, Seoul had become Pyongyang’s largest source of aid, trade, and tourism.54 Realism had motivated South Korea’s policy toward North Korea that promoted peace and stability on the peninsula, as well as encouraging the DPRK to move toward reforms to promote development and modernization. In December 2004, a Seoul department store sold out its entire stock of the Kaesong industrial zone’s first products—stainless steel pots priced at $19 a pair—in just two days. By then, the DPRK’s recent implementation of market reforms had resulted in the opening of new businesses in Pyongyang, including Internet cafes, restaurants, and karaoke and pool halls. But U.S. officials expressed concern about South Korea passing secret technology to North Korea. The Bush administration’s professions of support for the economic zone left South Koreans unconvincing that the United States favored reconciliation, rather than confrontation, between the two Koreas.55

53 Cumings, “Structural Basis of ‘Anti-Americanism,’” 95; Moon, “Between Banmi and Sangmi,” 146.
54 James Brooke, “Koreas Sidestep U.S. to Forge Political and Pragmatic Links,” New York Times, 26 June 2004. While the Athens Summer Olympics helped to promote Korean reconciliation, it intensified anti-Americanism in the ROK when a scoring error awarded a gold medal not to the South Korean gymnast who had earned it, but to an American athlete who then refused to approve correction of the error.
South Korean doubts about American sincerity in wanting to improve relations between the two Koreas received provocative confirmation. In October 2004, Bush signed the North Korean Human Rights Act, which banned economic aid to North Korea unless it made verifiable progress on human rights. This action essentially finished off any expectations for a breakthrough in the Six-Party Talks to end the DPRK’s nuclear weapons program that had begun in Beijing in August 2003. Throughout these negotiations, China, Russia, and the ROK, unlike Japan, had pressed Washington to offer concessions to Pyongyang in return for steps toward nuclear disarmament, but the Bush administration refused, culminating in its demand for complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement. Other nations joined in criticizing the United States for inflexibility. Further frustrating the Bush administration, Asian and European governments had joined South Korea in actively engaging North Korea on diplomatic, cultural, and economic levels. Developing an image of reasonableness, Pyongyang began to reconnect with the world community immediately after its first summit meeting with Seoul in June 2000. Five years later, the DPRK had established diplomatic ties with nineteen new countries that include Britain, Australia, and nations of the European Union. In 2005, North Korea had diplomatic ties with 155 countries and embassies in 41 of them.

North Korea’s “charm offensive” continued despite persistent U.S. hostility, helping strengthen anti-Americanism in South Korea. Bush’s reelection in 2004 brought word from Pyongyang that it would “respect and treat [the United States] as a friend unless [it] slanders the [DPRK’s] system and interferes in its internal affairs.” Six days later, Bush in his inaugural address dedicated his second term to achieving “the great objective of ending tyranny” around the globe and North Korea soon appeared on a State Department list of six “outposts of tyranny.” Reacting to these latest U.S. provocations, the DPRK announced on 10 February 2005 that it now possessed nuclear weapons to deter a U.S. attack. When the United States rejected bilateral negotiations, North Korea halted the Six-Party Talks. In South Korea, demands for immediate U.S. military withdrawal resumed on 29 May when thousands of protesters clashed with police outside Yongsan.


in South Korea would evaporate suddenly in October 2006, not because of a change in U.S. policy, but because North Korea exploded its first nuclear device. Contributing as well to the relaxation of tensions in U.S.-ROK relations were new Bush administration proposals that created optimism when the Six-Party Talks reconvened. An important consequence of these developments was the election of Yi Myongbak as president of South Korea in December 2007 on a platform which opposed further engagement if North Korea did not make real steps toward nuclear disarmament. During 2008, the new government in Seoul supported the U.S. demand for unrestricted inspections in North Korea that led to suspension of the Six-Party Talks, leaving all issues in dispute between the United States and North Korea unresolved as the Bush administration left office.58

Successful diplomacy requires a balance between means and ends in the pursuit of realistic goals. The Bush administration’s policy in Korea never came close to meeting this standard. After 2001, administration policy sought to achieve idealistic objectives without the support of the ROK, which had been one of the most loyal and dependable allies of the United States. This was one of many factors that fueled an escalation of historic anti-Americanism in South Korea that reached a crescendo in the middle of the Bush presidency. Although public hostility toward the United States had receded significantly when Barack Obama became president in January 2009, it certainly had not disappeared. North Korean military provocations muted anti-Americanism among its neighbors, notably the alleged sinking of an ROK warship and the shelling of a South Korean island.

Leadership changes in the DPRK, the ROK, and the United States during 2012 may well decide whether anti-Americanism in the South Korea will revive or remain dormant. The legacy of American racism, disregard for Korea, and support for military dictatorship means that anti-Americanism will not disappear, however, until American leaders develop a realistic policy toward the peninsula that does not cause most South Koreans to believe the United States is racist and blind in advancing American interests at their expense.

58 See Matray, “Needless Quarrel.”