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ANALYSIS

LEE MYUNG-BAK'S CONTINUITIES AND CHALLENGES

J. J. Suh

On December 19, 2007, when Lee Myung-bak was elected president of the Republic of Korea, there was a sense of comfort in Washington that the two allies would now be able to enjoy a more harmonious relationship. There are many reasons for the optimism. It helps the relationship that one of Washington's key allies in Asia successfully demonstrated the capacity to choose its newest president in a democratic election. Also, it will certainly be helpful to the Bush administration to have an openly pro-American conservative in Seoul. Furthermore, it helps Seoul that the new administration will inherit the fruits of outgoing President Roh's policies on the ROK-U.S. alliance transformation and the Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Lee will be able to continue, and accelerate, these policies without the burden of his predecessor's anti-American rhetoric.

One issue that may create dissonance between the allies, however, concerns North Korea. During the campaign, Lee Myung-bak pledged a "creative reconstruction of Korea's diplomacy" to improve relations with the United States and to demand more from North Korea. It remains to be seen how he will manage these two potentially contradictory goals if his desire to distance himself from Roh's engagement policy complicates the Bush administration's latest efforts at diplomacy with the North.

CONSOLIDATING THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

The election marks an important milestone in the development of Korea's democracy. It indicates that South Korea has now sufficiently institutionalized procedural liberal democracy, such that people can freely and democratically exercise their right to vote without fearing the military's intervention in domestic affairs. Throughout the electoral process, there was no talk about the possibility that the military might try to influence the outcome of the election. The glaring absence of the military in domestic politics contrasts starkly with Korea's recent past and other young democracies' present-day situations. Korea's long experience of military dictatorship and authoritarian rule now seems to belong squarely in the dustbin of history. The growing maturity of Korea's democracy was also reflected in the fact that the election was largely free of accusations of fraud or irregularities.

The consolidation of Korea's democracy, however, may pose challenges to Lee. First, Lee faces an independent counsel's investigation even before his term begins. Although the prosecutor's office cleared him of all the alleged wrongdoings in his business dealings prior to the election, suspicions still linger that the prosecutors' ver-

dict was politically motivated. An independent counsel is supposed to start its investigation of President-elect Lee in January. How this sensitive political issue is handled—and how effectively Korea addresses the “bad blood” created between Lee’s and Roh’s parties, and the growing apathy between them and the general public—will leave a lasting impact on the institutional health of Korea’s democracy.

Second, as political democracy matures in Korea, it has made the issue of economic disparity more salient. In what many political analysts call “a retrospective vote,” many voters cast their ballots as a vote of no confidence for the incumbent president, whom many blamed for their economic woes. Lee’s landslide victory results from the success of his campaign strategy that adroitly took advantage of the widely shared anxiety about the economy. But this brilliant success also produces great expectations that Lee, a former corporate executive, will boost the economy—which may constrain his attention and flexibility to address other issues.

ROK-U.S. ALLIANCE, FTA, AND NORTH KOREA

Despite his peppery rhetoric and “anti-American” remarks, outgoing President Roh had in fact taken many actions to strengthen the alliance and broaden the base of the ROK-U.S. relationship. It was during his presidency that the two allies agreed to transform the alliance into a 21st-century strategic relationship by granting the U.S. Forces in Korea “strategic flexibility” and by enlarging the alliance’s strategic vision. It was also under the Roh administration that the KOR-U.S. FTA was successfully negotiated. Given that these are the conservative agendas that Lee also favors, he is likely to maintain them. But the devil that will test him is in the details: Lee inherits the agreement that the Korean military will regain its wartime operational control by April 2012, but he may seek to renegotiate the actual timing of the transfer; and he will have to find a creative solution to the issues of beef and automobiles in order to convince the U.S. Congress to ratify the FTA.

Lee Myung-bak’s policies on North Korea, in contrast, will entail more than working out technical details, for they envision a departure from Roh’s engagement policy. His plan links engagement with two principles: “If the North gives up its nuclear programs and opens its economy, the South will help the North so that its per capita income will rise to \$3,000 within a decade.” This “engagement with principles” position is further combined with Lee’s pledge to be tougher on the North’s human rights conditions. How he translates these pledges into policies and actions will seriously affect the future of the Six Party talks.

Now the current phase of the delicate denuclearization process is at a critical juncture. The North Koreans have some crucial steps to take in order to complete the commitments they made last year to disable their nuclear facilities and to declare all their nuclear activities. Washington too has to soon decide whether to proceed to deliver its side of the bargain to remove the North from the list of states sponsoring terrorism and from its Trading With The Enemy Act.

When Lee is sworn into the presidential Blue House next February, he can help the denuclearization process, or he can harm it. He will help to the extent that he joins the others in the talks in convincing Pyongyang that their goal is the denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula, not regime change in Pyongyang. His positive influence may increase if he helps Pyongyang realize that its recalcitrance will not be rewarded. But if he decides to turn his “principles” into preconditions to engagement and raises the profile of the North’s human rights conditions in a way that alarms Pyongyang, he may complicate, or possibly even derail, the process.

Given Lee’s overall pragmatic and pro-U.S. orientation, he is likely to pay close attention to the signals Washington sends. The Bush administration will do well by sending a clear signal regarding the outcomes it hopes to see regarding the alliance, the FTA, and the Six Party talks.

The elections indicate that South Korea has now sufficiently institutionalized procedural liberal democracy, such that people can freely and democratically exercise their right to vote without fearing the military’s intervention in domestic affairs.