

The Balancer: Roh Moo-hyun's Vision of Korean Politics and the Future of Northeast Asia

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By Emanuel Pastreich

The President of the Republic of Korea is unique as a politician in the media age, both in embracing the potential of the Internet and refusing to pander to the sound bite. He spends hours on-line each week promoting his vision of e-government. The website of the Cheong Wa Dae presidential residence, the Korean equivalent of the White House, features a picture of Roh typing away furiously at his laptop. Roh, who has authored a biography of Abraham Lincoln, on whom he models himself, and like Lincoln, crafts speeches of great intellectual complexity. Roh also sees himself as the leader of a nation divided between North and South, and fragmented within. He works on the assumption that concepts and ideals can transform a society.



Moreover, Roh's lack of concern about criticism or bad press is remarkable. Repeatedly he has demonstrated that he is perfectly willing to accept blame, even risk his tenure in office, in the effort to implement his policies. Since his rise from relative obscurity to win in the presidential election on December 19, 2002, Roh has encountered unprecedented resistance within Korea from entrenched factions that see his attempts to transform the Korean government as a threat, direct or indirect. He has stepped on many toes in his pursuit of an ideal of new Korea. Although his selflessness has earned the respect of many, he has often failed to speak in a language that is easily grasped by corporate figures, bureaucrats and local politicians accustomed to a far more venal political tradition.

The culture of intimidation and corruption that dominated the authoritarian Fifth Republic (1980-1988) has not disappeared from Korea.

President Kim Young-sam continued many of the incestuous relations between government and business of his predecessors, even as he moved toward the rule of law. President Kim Dae-jung made great strides to open Korean society, but could only do so by making full use of the authority and gravitas of the presidential office in much the manner to which Koreans had grown accustomed during the 1970's and 1980's. By contrast, Roh has gone so far in making himself accessible. Roh expects government officials to be motivated by devotion to an ideal of what a Korean can be, rather than by personal benefit. Such a vision is as refreshing as it is unfamiliar for many Koreans.

Roh's problems, including the 2004 impeachment attempt against him by the conservative Grand National Party and some members of the Millennium Democratic Party (under whose banner he was first elected) are the product, above all, of the growing fragmentation of South Korean society. Korean politics had long been dominated by regional power bases such as Gyeongsang-do in the Southeast and Jolla-do in the Southwest. Those bases remain, but economic, social, and cultural issues have also become major factors, as demonstrated in Roh's election. Two major groups have emerged in Korean society, each with a radically different conception of domestic and international issues; each relies on different media sources for information. A serious breakdown in consensus within South Korea as a whole has made even simple tasks of administration complex for Roh.

First, there are the conservative forces that look at the U.S.-R.O.K. alliance as the bedrock of foreign policy, concentrate on economic to the neglect of social issues, and rely on such sources as the conservative newspaper Chosun Ilbo for their information about the world. This newspaper has been unrelentingly critical of Roh from the day he took office.

The second group consists largely of younger voters known commonly as the 3-8-6 (sam-pal-yuk) generation. The 3 refers to the fact that these voters are in their thirties (although now many are entering their forties). The 8 indicates that they entered college during the 1980's and experienced repression under the government of Chun Doo-hwan first-hand. As students they longed for a democratic system and were willing to work hard for it. Many of this generation were involved in the student protests that turned universities into teargas testing grounds. Finally, the 6 indicates that they were born in the 1960s and grew up during Korea's age of rapid industrial development.

These progressives are committed to social and political issues. The 3-8-6 generation is best represented by the Nosamo group (The Organization that Loves Roh Moo-hyun). This informal association of loyalists employed the Internet in an innovative manner to put him in office. They did so in spite of the overwhelming prophecies of doom produced by the conservative press that had most Americans—and many Koreans—believing that Roh did not have a chance. This group is highly critical of United States policy and imaginative in envisioning Korea's role in the world. Representing a broad spectrum of views, often crossing regional loyalties, they depend on such online progressive papers as Pressian and Oh My News for information and have embraced an interactive culture of instant messaging and video for both social and political action. The rate at which they disseminate information has transformed Korean society.

In addition, there are a significant number of citizens who are deeply alienated from government and see little prospect of change or progress from either side of the political spectrum. There has been a discernable increase in antipathy towards politics after the remarkable optimism surrounding the World Cup (June, 2002) and Roh's election

(December, 2002).

From the Margins to the Center: Roh Moo-hyun's Rise from Obscurity

Born after the Second World War, Roh is the first president of Korea who has only childhood memories of the Korean War. He is also the first who did not pursue the standard path to higher education. Even the most progressive voices in Korea working with labor and social issues generally come from established families of considerable privilege.

Roh was born to a poor farming family in the village of Gimhae nestled on Bonghwa Mountain in Gyeongsang-namdo. The year was 1946. His parents had little money, but devoted great effort to assure their children's education. In his autobiography, Roh speaks of how his mother's support and constant encouragement pushed him forward. He attributes his ability to avoid the general pessimism of youngsters in his hometown to her inspiration. Roh resembles a traditional Confucian scholar in attributing his achievements to strict moral standards upheld by his mother. His refusal to "be blown by the winds" as he writes, explains something of his later conflicts.

Roh graduated from Busan Commercial High School in 1966, one of the few that offered a scholarship for students without means. After fulfilling three years of military service, he married his childhood sweetheart, Kwon Yang-suk, and went to work. His first job at a company making fishnets paid so little that he could not even pay for food and rent. He decided to fulfill his childhood dream and study for the bar exam. With only a high-school diploma, he first had to pass a qualifying exam before he could even begin his studies. Finally he passed the bar exam on his fourth attempt in 1975. In a political world weighted down with recipients of doctorates, Roh is an odd bird.

Roh then completed a two-year program at the Judicial Research and Training Institute before serving as a district court judge in Daejeon in 1977. The fulfillment of his dream ironically forced Roh to confront the gap between his ideals of public service and success and, by contrast, the reality of government service during the 1970's under the authoritarian government of President Park Chung Hee. Roh resigned after only seven months and established his own law office. The following year, 1979, President Park was assassinated by the director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency. General Chun Doo-hwan then seized the presidency. Chun's brutal suppression of a pro-democracy demonstration in the city of Gwangju, and his systematic attempt to eliminate all elements critical of his administration from universities and newspapers, made Park Chung Hee, by comparison, seem like a moderate. When one lawyer found himself in trouble with the authorities because of political affiliations, Roh stepped in to handle the controversial case. As an unknown with no political affiliation, Roh seemed the perfect choice to handle the matter with discretion. The year was 1981.

Roh's legal defense of the students accused in the "Burim Incident" would transform him. Burim was the name of a student book club that the government had shut down, charging the students with studying illegal leftist theories. When he met young men who had been tortured, heard their stories and saw their injuries, Roh thought of his own son and wondered whether he might also suffer the same fate. His meetings with the distressed mothers of children who had disappeared brought home to him the full severity of repression in Korea, and led him to political engagement.

Human rights issues became primary for Roh. His passionate and eloquent defense of democracy, and his support for the nascent labor movement during the most repressive

period of contemporary Korean history, increased his visibility. He took an interest in ecological issues as the director of the Research Center for Environmental Pollution in Busan in 1984. He was a leader in the “June Struggle” of 1987, a nation-wide battle for a constitutional revision to allow direct presidential elections. He rose to national prominence when the government, yielding to the massive demonstrations, promised open presidential elections.

His life changed again when he was arrested in connection with the funeral for Lee Seok-gyu, a worker at the Daewoo Shipbuilding Factory who was killed by a tear-gas canister thrown by the police during a strike. Roh had represented the union in wage and compensation settlement negotiations, but his support for Lee led to charges of “third-party intervention” and “disrupting a funeral.” His right to practice law was suspended.

Roh decided to run for the National Assembly from the eastern district of Busan in 1988 as a member of the Reunification Democratic Party (RDP), the opposition party headed by Kim Young-sam. He defeated a ruling party candidate with strong financial backing and entered the National Assembly where he distinguished himself on the Labor Committee as an outspoken defender of worker’s rights. Roh led the questioning of top officials from the Chun administration on corruption charges as a member of the Special Committee Investigating Political Corruption during the Fifth Republic. While others did not dare to confront Chung Ju-yung, the founder of Hyundai, or Chang Se-dong, the former intelligence chief, Roh was eloquent and forthright in his questioning.

Roh led the opposition to the merger of the ruling party with two opposition parties to form the Democratic Liberal Party in 1990. Openly critical of the attempt by former opposition leader Kim Young-sam to obtain the presidency through compromise with the powers that had

led Korea through an era of repression, Roh called for a reform party that did not make such fundamental compromises to obtain power. When the Democratic Liberal Party, having come to power, forced through a telecommunications bill that ignored the concerns of citizens, Roh resigned his seat in the National Assembly and returned to organizing citizens. Although this commitment to principle kept him in the political margins during the early 90’s, it earned Roh a loyal base of supporters.

Roh played the role of a balancer within the opposition during the period from 1991 until Kim Dae-jung’s election in 1997. He led negotiations between smaller opposition parties aimed at creating the unity necessary to influence national policy. This period included multiple unsuccessful runs for local and national office (in 1992, 1995, 1996, 1999, and 2000) and even an initial foray as a Presidential candidate of the National Congress for New Politics (NCNP). But those failures enhanced his credibility among supporters because he appeared to be the only politician who would not compromise on the basic issues that motivated activists and progressive voters: transparency in government, government accountability to the citizen, participatory structures for government administration and efforts to rectify unfair distribution of resources by region and by social class. Moreover, Roh had spent his career demanding the truth from those in power. He struck a chord with those who wished to tear down the walls of secrecy surrounding events during the Japanese colonial period, the Korean War and the military governments.

He put together a network that would elect him as president in two phases: first during his work outside of the political world in the 1980’s and then in his efforts in the 1990’s to pull together various opposition parties as a viable alternative. These two different groups provided the legal and academic connections

that made him a national figure. The prominent religious leaders and lawyers who formed the opposition in Busan continued to support him through each election bid. The environmental protection movement, in which Roh was active from 1984, also proved loyal to him. Roh's commitment to recycling, energy conservation, and public transportation can be traced back to this period. The political culture in South Korea is distinctive in the degree to which poets and novelists play a role; intellectuals such as Rim Jeongnam, husband of the poet Gang Eungyo, and the novelist Kim Jeonghan gave him crucial support. The bottled-up enthusiasm and frustration of this 3-8-6 generation eventually propelled Roh forward onto the national stage.

Roh worked hard on the 1997 presidential campaign of Kim Dae-jung, the former prisoner of conscience and human rights advocate. Kim's victory was in part a response to the perceived failure of Korea's institutions to safeguard the common good during the IMF crisis. Roh's skill at unifying the progressive factions and balancing their needs aided in that success.

Kim brought with him to the presidency a flood of enthusiastic minds from the opposition ardent to remake Korea as an advanced democracy, Roh among them. Roh was appointed as Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries. This first opportunity to work in a national administration allowed him to experiment concretely with ministerial administration. He imported his trademark approach of non-hierarchical governance and horizontal interaction developed during democracy movement work. Although he had battled the government for decades, he felt, like a good Confucian, that government was ultimately capable of addressing the inequalities of society. He met constantly with fishermen, business interests, and ordinary citizens and civil servants of all levels in his attempts to resolve problems. He also implemented on a small scale his ideas

concerning "knowledge-based management."

Roh's Victory in the 2003 Election

When Roh was elected president by a clear majority on December 19, 2002, it seemed nothing short of miraculous. After all, his most prominent supporter Chung Mong-joon, son of the founder of the Hyundai conglomerate, had deserted Roh at the last moment. A variety of unusual and unprecedented approaches made this result possible.

President Kim Dae-jung had been elected on a platform of financial reform motivated by the humiliation and instability brought about by the 1997 IMF crisis. Although Kim did achieve a number of economic reforms, many Koreans longed for more comprehensive reform, particularly after a series of scandals associated with Kim's administration raised doubts as to how substantial reform was. Although Kim Dae-jung offered hope of a Korea that looked to the future regarding reunification, he retained much of the political apparatus associated by progressive voters with the corrupt patronage systems and unswerving political allegiances that had dominated Korea since the 1940s, and in some respects, since the 1920s. The self-made Roh projected an anti-establishment image, even while running as the candidate of the party in power.

Roh was under attack for being unqualified from the start of the campaign. Although politically active since 1988, his only direct experience in the central government was the seven months he had served as Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries. Roh's opponent in the primaries said: "the Cheong Wadae presidential residence is not a training ground for Presidents." His opponent in the national election, Lee Hoi-chang, was a member of the establishment who had served in numerous high positions before becoming Prime Minister.

Roh countered these attacks in an essay on his achievements as minister that was posted on his web page. He gave concrete examples of how he served as a leader and resolved conflicts between groups. He introduced plans to reinvigorate the Korean government and empower ordinary public officials while lashing out at bureaucrats who idle away their time at predictable routine meetings while clinging to their authority.

While Roh clearly lacked experience with diplomacy, defense, or economics, he projected to some the decisiveness and vision to be President. Roh's opponent Lee was the obvious favorite, but a financial scandal and the revelation that his son had avoided the military draft through nefarious means unexpectedly turned the race into a dead heat. Roh successfully portrayed himself as the common man, a bright new face who stood up to established power. Most importantly, those immediately loyal to Roh from his previous campaigns for democracy and human rights put a degree of effort into the campaign that could not be matched by Lee's supporters. Young people worked around the clock, providing quick responses to the Lee team's actions that were disseminated through the Internet to great effect.

Roh's hopes for a new role for Korea had particular appeal in Korea at a time when hundreds of thousands of Koreans gathered across the nation to protest the acquittal by a U.S. military court of two soldiers whose armored vehicle had accidentally killed two young girls the previous June. The tragedy drew attention to the fact that the Status of Forces Agreement for the American military denies Korea courts jurisdiction, which is not the case in Japan and Germany. The successful joint sponsorship of the World Cup, in which Korea reached out to Japan, its rival and former colonial master, in a mature manner appropriate to an advanced nation, inspired new confidence.

In the wake of this success, the legal handling of the accident involving U.S. troops reminded Koreans that they did not yet enjoy the privileges appropriate to their emergence as a responsible democracy and economic power. The lasting inequalities in the military and diplomatic relations between Korea and the United States prompted many Koreans to favor the candidate who offered a more independent and assertive Korea.

Although the election was widely viewed as a confrontation between conservatives and progressives, there is much to suggest that policy differences, rather than overarching ideology, determined the outcome. Roh's passion for justice was based more on a Confucian sense of fairness, and he declined to embrace leftist doctrines even as he worked with members of the left. He spoke during the campaign of institutional change without ideological coloration and was therefore able to avoid attempts to paint him into a corner. The difference in class origins between Lee, a man from an extremely privileged family, and Roh, a self-made man who modeled himself on Lincoln, was obvious to voters.

Roh as President: Navigating the Waters of Korea's Political Culture

Roh as President has sought to project an image that combines authority, determination, and humility. Yet a certain youthful vitality, even impishness, still shines through. At the same time, he shows great respect to others at staff meetings, especially women, whose cause he has championed as no one in government before.

The Internet has allowed Roh to interact directly with officials at all levels of government, without any intermediary. He spends hours every evening in debates with officials at all levels of government, to a degree unprecedented in Korean history. Roh seeks to bring the citizen into politics and positions

himself as the advocate of the common man. His decision to prohibit private conferences with individuals displays high integrity even as it challenges patterns of influence and patronage that have long dominated Korean politics. Roh stated that he will meet with no one, even concerning matters of national security, without another person present. Meant as an affirmation of probity, as was the case in his encouragement of officials at all levels to confer directly with the president, his policies violated accepted practice and the chain of command.

Roh has pioneered e-government as a means both of streamlining and democratizing government. He has put his “Government for Citizens” policy (known as “G4C”) to work by making the Internet a means of communication available to all citizens, or “netizens,” as a Korean buzzword has it. One finds open access to networked computers throughout Korea. With some 31 million people (70% of the population) using the Internet regularly Korea is challenging hierarchies of power within government and society. This is the cause of much of both the optimism and the conflict found in Korea today.

Those who are accustomed to the oratory of American politicians are certainly in for a surprise if they hear one of Roh’s speeches. First, Roh conducts himself with great confidence while maintaining an understated appearance. His voice is level and his speech is driven by a logical argument that connects concepts with concrete issues. More importantly, whereas many politicians assume that a general audience cannot understand complex ideas and so fill their speeches with sound bites, Roh explains complex issues regardless of his audience. He assumes that there is no concept, or contradiction, too complex for the average listener to follow. Perhaps this approach stems from the fact that Roh is self-taught.

Roh sees his speeches as a critical part of his policy. His writings are so literary that they are a pleasure to read, and often verge on the spiritual as they grapple with institutional issues. His speeches call to mind those of Lincoln, a leader fully capable of compromise, but who saw his calling as something greater than the interests that elected him. It is not that Roh is inattentive to the interest groups that elected him, but he takes a remarkably broad view of his office and has not shown any grudges or resentment against his opponents.

In a word, Roh hews to the Confucian idea that principles can transform a nation. He has written about what he calls “beautiful principles” and embraced a profound esthetic of governance. Much like the great King Sejong who embraced both institutional reform and technological innovation at the height of Korean power in the fifteenth century, Roh meets regularly with scholars and experts to seek advice on affairs of state. Unlike many other world leaders, he spends relatively little time cultivating relations with special interest groups. In fact, although many complain about his policies, Korea has clearly become a far more open and mature society precisely during Roh’s tenure.

Overall, Roh is a moderate in his policies whose independence makes him quite distinctive. His decision to send troops to Iraq, for example, went against the wishes of many of his strongest supporters. He did so because he judged that the long-term interests of Korea were best served through a strong commitment to the United States. Although he clings to his ideals of good governance, he refuses to take an ideological stance. Roh’s class background gave him a certain distance from the ideological battles of students during the democracy movement. He was not caught up in Marxism and class theories, even as he was keenly conscious of political struggle and the plight of the oppressed. He has stated explicitly that he does not support socialism: “Because

the legal system I studied, from constitutional law to civil law, was all based on a relativistic philosophical basis, I never felt that socialism could present a viable alternative.”

Many educated Koreans were highly critical of Roh from the beginning because of his lack of an elite background. He had never been to the United States before inauguration, whereas many high officials had studied there. Roh overcame some of those disadvantages through remarkable conviction and tenacity. Roh appeals to a constituency that views high government officials as the servants of reactionary social forces, charged with restricting access to benefits for ordinary citizens. Roh offers a vision of a progressive and modern Korea in which the rule of law would be fundamental and meritocracy would thrive. His conception of a “people’s victory” and of an economic boom as part of economic and technological integration with the rest of Northeast Asia express the hope that Korea could become a leader and determine its own future.

Participatory democracy is taken seriously under Roh: both in the sense of the relationship between citizens and the state and the relationship between low-ranking civil servants and the administration. Yet Roh’s promise to reduce alienation and inequality within society and address the concentration of wealth has proved more elusive. To a degree, the disappointment felt by some Koreans with the Roh administration stems from the remarkable ambition of his goals. Thus far, Roh’s numerous proposals for improving the lot of the working poor and investing in rural areas have been effectively blocked.

Roh strives to maintain a balance between, on the one hand, the social and cultural needs of average citizens and, on the other, the demands of businesses competing in a globalized economy, a balance between the concentration of wealth and education in the

capital of Seoul and the concrete needs for development of farming and fishing villages like the one where Roh grew up. In short, Roh’s commitment to a “diffusion of power” was bound to create opposition. He worked to decentralize government, in part by continuing the plan to transfer many agencies to Daejeon and a general shift of authority away from the capital. These policies clashed with a 400-year history of concentration of government, business, intellectual capital, and culture in Seoul.

Roh’s vision of “balanced development” assumes that government can play an expanded role in education, culture, welfare, the environment, and the elimination of discrimination. The ideal of balance resembles the New Deal promise of opportunity for all citizens. Roh has committed himself to undoing a legacy of distortion and unfairness and increasing competitive skills through education, increasing opportunities for women in the workplace, and constructing a safety net for citizens through enhanced social services and reduction of social inequality.

A striking television advertisement from Roh’s campaign features his wife Kwon Yang-suk visiting the mentally ill. She enters a grimy building and shakes hands with the residents wearing pajamas. The ad struck a chord among progressive voters, drawing attention to Roh’s commitment to the less fortunate. The use of captions for the hearing impaired in television broadcasts has exploded during Roh’s term. The handicapped appear regularly on national news and the emphasis on labor in the media is also unprecedented in Korea.

There is deep disappointment on the part of some who had the highest expectations for a thorough transformation of Korean society after Roh’s election. The involvement of some of those around Roh in corruption related to Korea Railroad’s investment in an oil project on Russia’s Sakhalin Island led some to wonder

whether the money politics of earlier regimes had changed at all. The neo-liberal premises of the February 2004 free trade agreement with Chile disappointed many of the farmers and labor activists who had worked so hard for Roh. Similar discussions concerning FTA agreements with Japan and the United States clash with the hopes of Roh supporters who would prefer to see the administration focus on social issues. In addition, Roh's vision of South Korea as a business hub for Northeast Asia has resulted in efforts to eliminate barriers to foreign investment in Korea in the face of protests by farmers, small business owners and activists who were his supporters. Korea's role as a balancer in a world dominated by global capital has trumped the role of the government as a defender of the individual citizen. Like Clinton and Koizumi before him, Roh is increasingly drawn under the influence of international markets.

Roh has been plagued by the difficulty of winning support from the establishment in general and the bureaucracy in particular. This situation is, in part, a product of his aggressiveness in tackling such sensitive topics as collaboration under Japanese occupation and the nature of authoritarian rule under the Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo-hwan regimes. For example, on April 3, 1948, South Korean forces massacred more than 20,000 residents of Jeju Island in response to an uprising by communist insurgents. No official acknowledgement of the massacre was made for decades. On October 31, 2003, Roh visited Jeju and announced: "As the head of state, I sincerely apologize for the wrongdoings of the past state authority." It was an official statement by an incumbent. This was just the beginning of Roh's campaign for truth.

The search for truth extended to the bitterly contested and deeply painful colonial period. Collaboration, as in any colonial society, ran deep, especially among the elite. Hence the tremendous controversy evoked by the commission established with the support of Roh

for investigation of collaborators during the colonial period. This Collaboration Truth Commission, made up of lawyers and academics appointed by Roh, plans to begin investigations in earnest in the summer of 2005. While holding out the promise of a resolution to long-standing resentments within Korean society, the Commission stirs fears that such investigations will be abused for political purposes.

Nor is the search for truth limited to the colonial period. Recent revelations concerning the possible involvement of President Park Chung Hee in the assassination of Kim Hyung-wook, former Director of the KCIA in 1977, and the incessant investigations of corruption in government and business are emblematic of a new political culture and help to explain the hostility Roh provokes among many sectors of the elite. Equally important, Roh's moves towards rapprochement with North Korea, including high-level military talks and offers of economic assistance, his agenda to expand social services, and his independence from the Bush administration on a range of issues including the question of North Korea and the nature of U.S. troop deployments in South Korea, all provoked his opponents to attack.

The hostility between Roh supporters and the older establishment came to a head in the impeachment proceedings brought against him by the opposition party and members of his own party in 2004. The political and economic establishment united against him, bringing charges that he had violated the constitutional obligation of "political neutrality" by openly appealing to the nation to support the Uri Party during a televised news interview. His maverick proposal to hold a national referendum as a confidence vote to decide whether he should stay in office was similarly branded unconstitutional. Finally corruption cases involving his close aides and claims of administrative incompetence were raised. While these issues were debated, Roh's

supporters held massive candlelight vigils for him in the streets of Seoul. The Constitutional Court struck down the impeachment, declaring that charges of incompetence and mismanagement were irrelevant and Roh's call for support for the Uri Party not grave enough to warrant impeachment.



The impeachment proceedings backfired when many Koreans, offended by the attempt to use extreme constitutional means to unseat a properly elected president, poured out to vote. The previously obscure Uri Party won control of the National Assembly for the first time in the April 15th elections. The generational split in this election was clearer than it had been in previous election. On one side were young voters in their 20's and 30's who imagined a new and open Korean society without the lingering the ghosts of the past. On the other were the survivors of the Korean War who looked at Roh's policies as nothing less than class warfare against the establishment that had built contemporary Korea.

Roh's Vision of a Dynamic Korea at the Heart of Northeast Asia

Roh has promoted Korea as a business hub for Northeast Asia, a role that should be understood in light of his vision of a future for

the region similar to the economic and systemic integration of the European Union. He has walked a fine line between the recognition of Korea's increasing economic, financial and technological integration with China—South Korea's trade with China exceeded trade with the United States in 2003 and educational and cultural ties have similarly flourished—and a desire to maintain good political and business ties with the United States and the rest of the world. Repeatedly, South Korean NGO's, universities, and government agencies have taken the lead in discussing cooperation in Northeast Asia. Roh has moved away from his own wariness about the influence of foreign capital in Korea, in part because he has come to recognize how such business serves to promote his vision of Asian integration.

Roh delivered his most striking articulation of Korea's future role in a speech on March 22, 2005 that announced "Korea will play the role of a balancer, not only on the Korean peninsula, but throughout Northeast Asia." The positive potential of this new vision of Korea working to resolve the conflicts between China, Japan, Russia and other nations while maintaining a military alliance with the United States was quickly drowned out by negative responses in the United States and Japan. The fear was that Korea was distancing itself from the American security umbrella in the Pacific and moving closer to China. Also, uncertainty was created by the possibility that Korea intended to play a competing role as a regional leader. The last Korean to articulate a vision of Korea as a balancer in East Asia was Sin Sukju in the fifteenth century. In the centuries since, Korea found itself subject to the impositions of the great powers, notably China, Japan, and the United States, at times with tragic consequences.

Yet overall the vision of South Korea as "balancer" and the aspiration for a more assertive Korean role in international affairs appeal across party lines. Many recognize the validity of a bridge-building role for Korea at a

time when economic integration with China and Japan present great challenges. Globalization has now decisively brought to an end Korea's proverbial status as the "hermit kingdom" of Asia. As one among many signs of the changes underway, the Korea Tourism Association now offers a service through which any foreigner can call a toll-free number and be immediately connected with an interpreter who will supply simultaneous translation from Korean into Japanese, French, Italian, German, Arabic, Turkish, Thai, Chinese, Spanish, Russian, Portuguese, Polish, Swedish, Vietnamese and English free of charge. This service is not merely a matter of catching up with the advanced nations: the variety of languages available shows a global perspective not found in comparable services available in other countries.

This effort at international cosmopolitanism must be contrasted with the intense emotional response to the tangled web of history and territory that infects South Korea's relationship with China and Japan. China recently published history textbooks that claim the Goguryo Dynasty (37 B.C.-668 A.D.) was in fact a "Chinese" empire. As the territory of Goguryo included all of North Korea, in addition to all of Manchuria, this passage in the proposed history books set off a storm of protests. Similar protests were launched when Japan claimed the rocky islets between the two countries known as Dokdo (Takeshima in Japanese) as Japanese territory. Those islets have been controlled by Korea since the end of the Second World War. Yet anger at the violation of Korea's historical legacy displayed in the protests over the territorial and historical disputes has not prevented Koreans from organizing, along with Chinese and Japanese, numerous conferences on the shared history of East Asia, nor have they inhibited continued economic and financial interpenetration among these nations.

Roh's Push for Improved Relations with

North Korea

The lynchpin of Roh's vision of Korea's future role in Northeast Asia is North Korea. Integration and normalization with North Korea and resolution of the crisis caused by North Korea's development of nuclear weapons capability are the foundations for a more assertive and constructive role for Korea throughout Asia, and the easing of an explosive situation that divides Northeast Asia. Although South Korean military spending has increased and Roh has made pointed criticisms of North Korea on occasion, he has been unflagging in his devotion to peaceful resolution of the conflict. The Roh administration has increased support for the economic development zone in Gaeseong. The hosting of a fashion show with a top South Korean model there to promote investment in North Korea in June is illustrative of the change in North-South relations. KT Corporation, the largest telecommunications firm in South Korea, similarly started fixed-line telephone service linking the Gaeseong industrial complex with North Korea in May and is expanding them to other regions.

Such efforts to assert a South Korean plan have bogged down repeatedly under virulent attacks from the American right. Much of the effort expended on the part of the Roh administration has consisted of putting out fires rather than promoting the Korean vision. Finding a nuanced analysis of Roh's domestic and international policies in the American press is a challenge. Typical of the assaults is the article by Daniel Kennelly published in *The American Enterprise Magazine* entitled "Time for an Amicable Divorce with South Korea." Kennelly writes, "The current government in Seoul is the most anti-American in the short history of the Republic of Korea. It is a left-wing administration that has fanned public sentiment against U.S. troops." Roh's administration has been consistently portrayed as an unreliable ally that undermines American security concerns. The commitment of South

Korea to the invasion of Iraq, made in the face of popular opinion, has received minimal recognition from the Bush administration.

The Roh administration has conducted talks with North Korea concerning fishing rights, communication liberalization, and the opening up of roads and railroad tracks, while also organizing occasional gatherings of students and citizens from the North and South. The number of families reunited—if only for brief meetings—now numbers in the thousands. Images of North Korea and interviews with North Koreans are now common on South Korean television where they had been banned just a few years ago.

While showing strong commitment to the six-party (the United States, Japan, China, Russia, South Korea and North Korea) talks aimed at arriving at a diplomatic solution to the problem posed by the North's nuclear weapons program, the Roh administration has neither designated North Korea as an immediate threat nor hinted at "other options" should North Korea fail to return to the negotiating table. Roh's basic assumption is that creating an environment of trust is critical in the long run. He has repeatedly presented the North Korea nuclear problem as a matter of resolving differences between the United States and North Korea in ways that both would ultimately favor.

Roh has never suggested that North Korea is either an implacable adversary or a nation on the edge of total collapse. Rather he sees reunification as a goal that can only be achieved through progress toward a unified Asian community akin to that of Europe. Finally, he follows Kim Dae-jung's sunshine policy, assuming that economic sanctions will not lead North Korea to halt the development of nuclear weapons. All of these approaches, embraced by many South Koreans, have met with great skepticism, even hostility, from the Bush administration.

Roh Grapples with Japan

Like Kim Dae-jung, Roh entered office with the intention of improving relations with Japan as part of an overarching strategic vision of Korea at the center of an economically and culturally integrated Northeast Asia. In commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan, both governments declared the year 2005 Korea-Japan Friendship Year. The cultures of both countries are mutually accessible today, as never before. Korean soap operas and pop singers find an enthusiastic reception in Japan, while Japanese anime, manga, video games and novels found a wide audience in Korea. With major investments in each other's economies growing, negotiations on a free trade agreement have been taken up in earnest.

The popular Korean journal *Sin dong-a* featured an article the February edition of this year by a Japanese reporter describing the unprecedented interest in Korea on the part of Japanese and the profound implications of the Korean cultural boom in Japan.

Imagine everyone's surprise when, on February 23—just two months into the Korea-Japan Friendship Year—Tokyo's ambassador to the Republic of Korea, Takano Toshiyuki, described the Korean islets known as Dokdo in the following manner at a press conference: "Takeshima (the Japanese name for the islets) is historically and legally Japanese territory." Coming at such an inopportune moment, and followed by the dispatch of a Japanese patrol boat and a Japanese helicopter to the waters near Dokdo, Koreans viewed these actions as a serious provocation by a nation with a long history of military expansion directed at Korea. Combined with efforts, which received international attention at the time, to remove all references to Japanese crimes during the Second World War from elementary school textbooks, these acts were perceived as pure

aggression by most Koreans. As Roh wrote in a letter he posted on the Cheong Wa Dae website: “such an action is no less than an attempt to legitimize past Japanese aggression and deny Korean independence since the Second World War.”

The emotional response within Korea included individuals cutting off their fingers and setting themselves afire in protest at massive rallies held in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. Roh responded with a “Message to the People Concerning Korea-Japan Relations” on March 23 that laid out a stern response to the Japanese act. He announced the launching of a “diplomatic war” and criticized the failure of previous Korean administrations to respond forcefully to Japan. He promised a firm diplomatic response. But Roh also exhorted his countrymen to avoid hostility towards the Japanese as a people.

Foreign minister Ban Ki-moon announced Seoul's opposition to Japan's bid for permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council. Yet at the very same time that Roh put forth this firm diplomatic response, he refused to postpone the scheduled summit meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, or to break off the extensive economic and social ties binding the two countries together. Further, Roh chose to criticize Japan indirectly by visiting Germany and praising its efforts to promote European integration. There was no mistaking the meaning of his unconditional support for German membership in the Security Council.

Conclusion

The speed with which Roh has implemented reforms and innovations has been both exhilarating and destabilizing. Many who oppose Roh, and support the conservative opposition, do so in the hope that Korea once again will become predictable and comprehensible. Yet the changes taking place

in Korea are not entirely of Roh's making. He is trying, at times desperately, to do what the protagonist of Chaucer's Knight's Tale did: “make virtue of necessity.” Globalization is the hidden hand that drives social and economic change. Roh tries to give that transformation a spin of altruism.

There is also an immense gap between the thoughtful words that Roh types at his computer late at night and what they come to mean when unleashed on the world. The ultimate competition for meaning is not entirely in Roh's hands, after all. For example, “balancer” is the English translation of the Korean term *gyunhyeongja* presented by the South Korean government. Yet “balancer” in English has connotations that are the very opposite of Roh's intention. In the geopolitical terms employed by American academics, “balancer” refers to the attempt of lesser powers to form alliances to counterbalance American global influence. Cooperation between China, India and Russia, for example, is interpreted as an attempt at “balancing.” Roh meant the term to refer to the Confucian task of mediation and resolution of conflict. Because Korea has such deep commitments to the United States, China and Japan, he reasoned, it can serve as an ombudsman of sorts. This possible meaning was completely lost on Americans who saw the term as implying increased distance.

Roh continues to face resistance from every side. While maintaining troops in Iraq in the face of bitter opposition from his core supporters, he has also opened new dialogs with North Korea in the face of adamant conservative criticism, and he declared at the World Newspaper Congress in Seoul that “certain newspapers with a special interest or a certain ideology should not dominate the press market” at a time when media criticism seriously threatened his political future. His conception of balance consists of an unending battle against the conflicting forces that try to

claim center stage in Korean society. The role of balancer is ultimately that of a warrior.

A Note on Sources

The Cheong Wa Dae website includes speeches, policy statements, timelines, and other biographical documents related to Roh Moo-hyun's life and political activities.(in Korean) His [speeches](#) are also available (in Korean).

[Earlier broadcasts from his election campaign are available. A short formal biography is available in English.](#) The [Nosamo Group](#) also offers valuable materials concerning Roh's life.

Two other important sources for biographical information are Roh's 1994 autobiography "Hey, can you give me a hand" (Yeobo na jomdowa chweo) and the shorter, but more useful, autobiography of the same year entitled, "I followed my intentions while walking along the

road I chose" (Nae ga seontaek han gil eul nae ddeut daero geoleotta). The newspapers Joongang Ilbo, Chosun Ilbo, Hankyoreh and the magazine Mal were also consulted, as was a compilation of articles on Roh from the [Kukmin Ilbo](#).

Interviews were conducted with several Korean diplomats and scholars concerning Roh Moo-hyun. Sadahiro Takashi of the Yomiuri Shimbun provided me with numerous articles concerning Roh Moo-hyun published in that newspaper. Finally, my thanks to Eric Marler, Jim Kawakami, Gavan McCormack and Mark Selden for their comments and suggestions.

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