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**THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOUTH KOREAN POLITICS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S.-KOREA RELATIONS**

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The speed and scope of South Korea's political development in recent years have been as impressive as its economic development in previous decades. Since the transition to democracy occurred, with the belated arrival of political liberalization and a return to direct presidential elections in 1987, virtually all realms of Korean society have democratized.

- In the political realm, under the Kim Dae-jung government, power shifted from the Kyongsang area in the southeast to Cholla in the southwest. This horizontal power shift is important for ending the political dominance of the Kyongsang area. Regional competition in the public policy-making process has become more democratic.
- Both the Roh government and National Assembly have become more accountable for the public's welfare and are better monitored by the Korean people. The power of public authority was often unchecked and misused in the past. Now Korean voters and civic representatives monitor whether public officials and assemblymen represent the public's interest and observe their due responsibilities.
- In terms of civilian-military relations, the government has become fully civilian, as the Korean military was completely depoliticized in the early 1990s. The history of former generals seizing the presidency was denounced and two former presidents, Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo, were convicted of crimes and sent to prison. As its image has become more progressive, the Korean military is regaining the public trust.
- Economic liberalization has been no less impressive. With the 1998 Asian financial crisis, Korea's big businesses (*chaebols*) and financial companies underwent substantial reforms that have led to enhanced transparency in corporate governance and financial accountability, among other areas.
- The most impressive gains, however, were made in the area of democratization, with the rise of a civil society. Although still not to the degree seen in advanced nations, Korean society has become increasingly conscious and supportive of the rights of women and minorities, including the handicapped and homosexuals. Traditional Korean values such as respect for authority and hierarchy are rapidly giving way as increased value is placed on individual freedoms and equality. These social democratic changes were driven in part by reform-minded governments and the efforts of domestic NGOs.

Paradoxically, all this progress appears to have created a society more fragmented than ever before, with increased social conflict and instability. In the last few years, the debate over major policy issues has reflected the increasing polarization of Korean social values and attitudes. At the same time, the ideological pendulum has been swinging in the liberal, or leftist, direction. For the last several decades, Korean society has been relatively conservative, valuing stability and order. Naturally, democratization, which has been more vibrant in Korea than in any other part of Asia, has generated a range of competing ideas that promise a departure from the past, and opportunities for more new ideas. Korea's democratization has had an especially liberating effect on leftist ideals and values, which were severely repressed in the past. Since "leftist" remains a negative label to many Koreans, new contesting ideas and ideological dispositions have been termed "progressive." Thus, the political divide between "conservatives" and "progressives" would be analogous to the divide between "conservatives" and "liberals" in U.S. politics.

Many reformers argue that much of the current polarization in Korean society is likely to dissipate as Korea's democracy consolidates and matures. As new institutions and rules take root, competing ideas will come to terms with one another, resulting in social stability. Skeptics, on the other hand, see large and unnecessary social costs associated with the democratization of Korean society. They argue that over the last fifteen years, the reform drive, with populist goals in mind, has often been misguided, resulting in the disintegration of a social order that had maintained decades of consensus and social harmony. Whichever view is correct, it is important to examine the issues that polarize Korean society and identify the sources that drive this polarization.

This paper aims to examine the new political dynamics in South Korea and their implications for U.S.-Korea relations. First, it will look at the political transformation of South Korea through the April 2004 National Assembly election. Second, it will analyze how Korean civil society has been polarized along generational and ideological fault lines. Third, it will examine the social conditions and background creating these fault lines. Last, it will assess the implications of this new political dynamism for South Korea's alliance with the United States.

I. The April 2004 National Assembly Elections

The National Assembly elections held on April 15, 2004 were highly significant, as they were essentially a proxy vote of public confidence in President Roh Moo-hyun, a progressive who had narrowly won the December 2002 presidential election. With an outspoken leadership style, President Roh encountered numerous difficulties in his first year and watched his approval ratings plummet. His problems included revelations of illegal campaign funds used in the presidential election as well as corruption scandals involving a number of his close aides. As a tactical move to regain political control, on October 13, 2003, about eight months after taking the oath of office, the President himself suggested a national referendum for a vote of confidence in his administration. However, the idea was ruled unconstitutional.¹

A party realignment aggravated President Roh's problems. In the fall of 2003, after an intense internal feud, a major faction of the ruling party loyal to President Roh broke away from the Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) and formed the Uri Party. Although the President was not an official member,² the Uri Party became the de facto ruling party, leaving the MDP in disarray and at half its previous strength. When the President publicly expressed his support for the Uri Party in the general election, and subsequently received a reprimand from the National Election Committee for violating the election law that requires the President to remain neutral in elections, the embittered MDP seized the opportunity to launch an aggressive impeachment campaign. In a matter of weeks, the MDP gained the support of the Grand National Party (GNP), the main opposition party and the MDP's longstanding nemesis. This unusual coalition of old enemies threatened to proceed with an impeachment vote unless the President made a "genuinely heartfelt

¹ Seven months after the suggestion of a referendum, the Constitutional Court ruled that calling a referendum for a vote of confidence in a presidency is unconstitutional. It said that only a special policy or law can be the object of a referendum as a way of realizing direct democracy, and that determining confidence in a representative can be done only through an election. See "Ruling of the Constitutional Court on the Impeachment of President Roh Moo-hyun" in *JoongAng Daily*, *Chosun Ilbo* and other major daily newspapers, May 14, 2004.

² President Roh entered the Uri Party officially on May 20, 2004 after he was reinstated from impeachment.

apology” to the nation. President Roh called their bluff and refused to apologize, instead defending his actions and policies in a national address. On March 12, 2004, after physically removing Uri Party Assembly members who had seized the National Assembly podium to block the vote, the MDP and GNP voted to impeach President Roh by a count of 193 to 2.

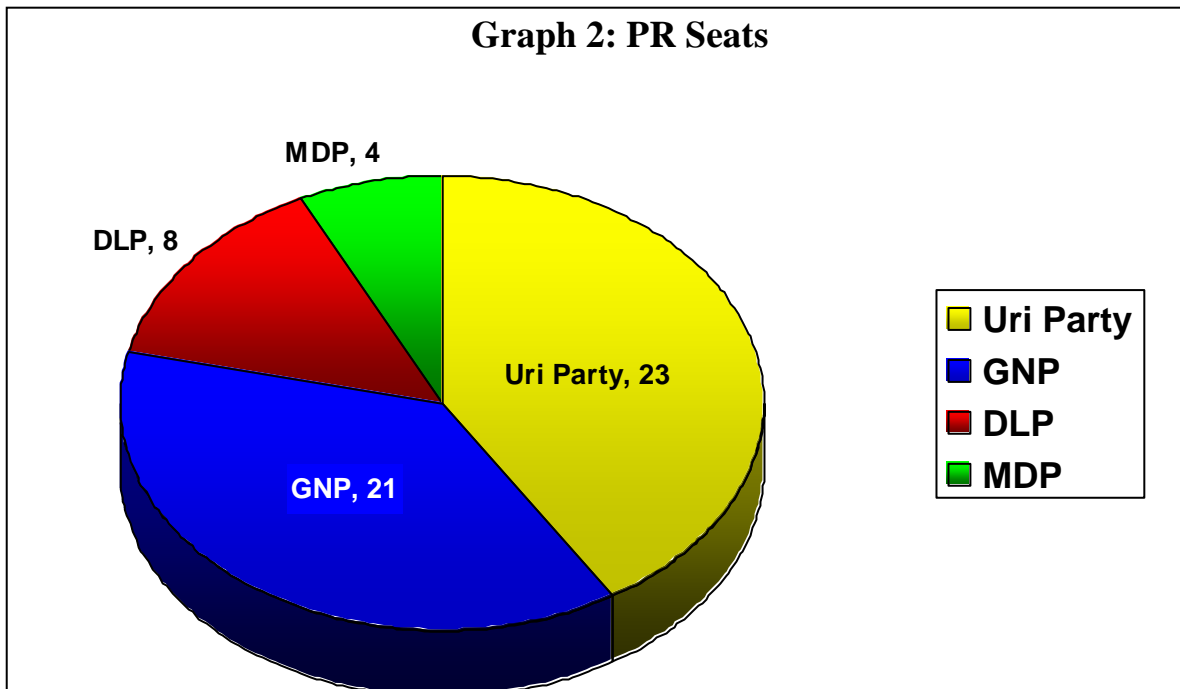
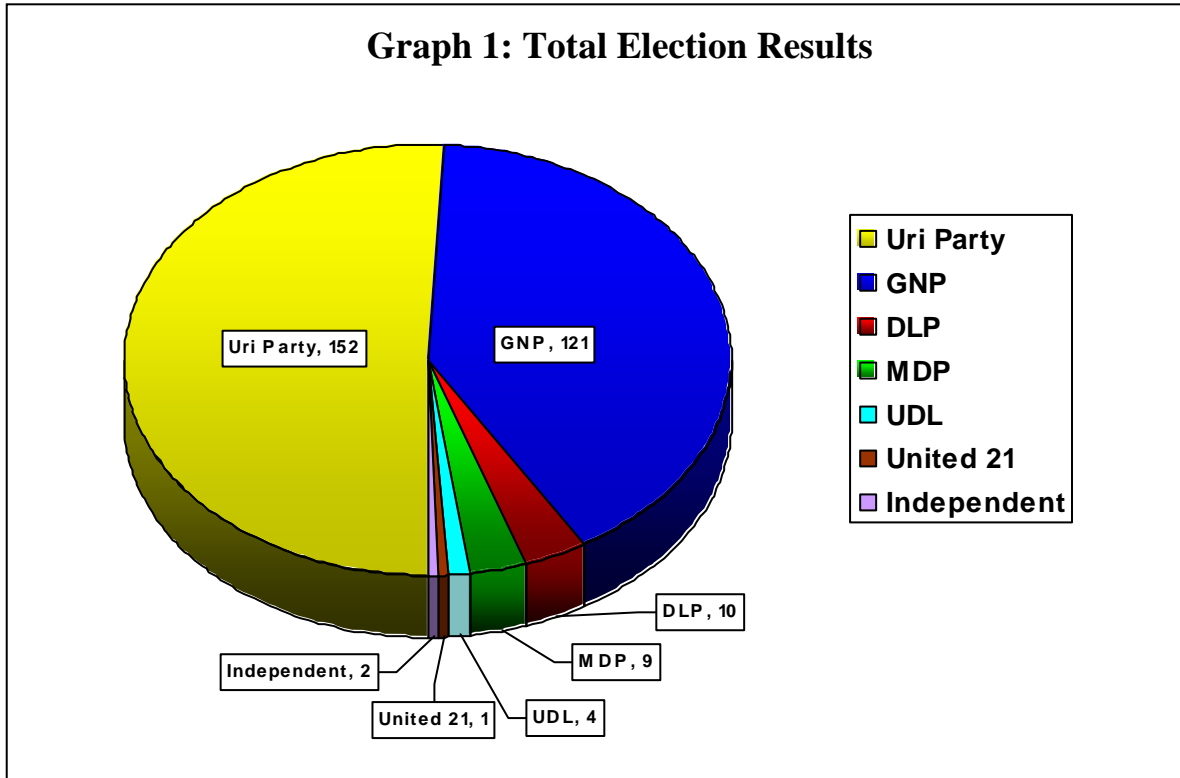
Public reaction to the impeachment was swift and largely negative; televised images of physical brawling in the National Assembly revolted the electorate. President Roh’s supporters immediately took to the streets to stage candlelight protests. Sympathy for the President spread rapidly, with anti-impeachment public opinion as high as 70 percent. Public mistrust of politicians had been high in Korean society to begin with, and the National Assembly members who had voted in favor of the impeachment were suddenly targets of intense criticism. Although unhappy with President Roh’s governing style and policies, the Korean public viewed his enemies in the National Assembly as being far more corrupt and incompetent, with no moral legitimacy or authority to impeach the President. In this political environment, an election victory was all but certain for the Uri Party, which, not surprisingly, was able to attract many new candidates and members.

The 2004 National Assembly election was held under a new election law. In the past, Korean voters cast a single ballot for a candidate in their local district and the political parties divided a separate number of national seats proportional to the votes their parties gained in the local constituency seats. Under the new law, voters have two ballots - one for their local candidate in a single member district where the simple plurality rule applies and the other for the political party they favor. When Korean voters had only one ballot for a single member of their local district, they tended to vote by their party affiliation rather than for individual candidates themselves. Voters typically chose candidates belonging to the political party that would represent their regional interests in national politics. Under the new system, while remaining loyal to their regionally identified party candidate in their local district, voters can use their Proportional Representation (PR) vote to support a party whose general policies they favor. The Assembly itself has also expanded to 299 seats, with 243 constituency seats from local districts and 56 PR seats. Voter turnout for the 2004 National Assembly election was 60 percent, 2.7 percent higher than in the previous election in 2000, but low considering the heated politics following Roh’s impeachment.³

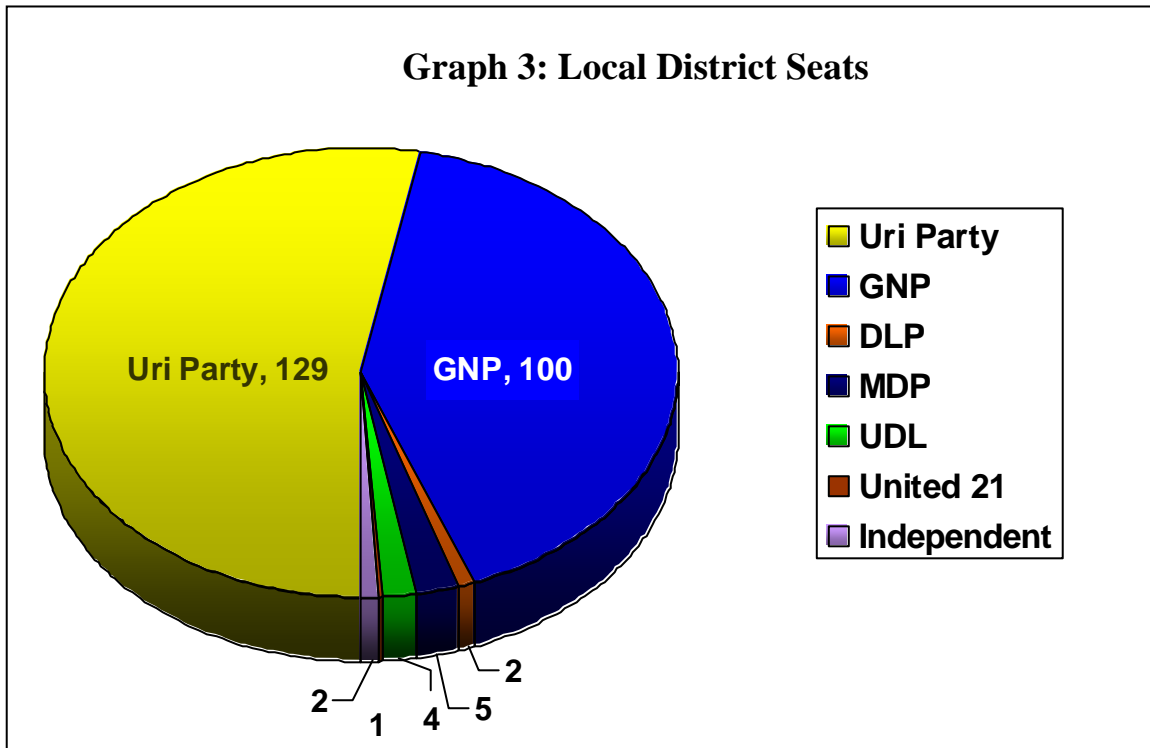
As expected, the election outcome drastically altered the make-up of the National Assembly. Prior to the election, the GNP held the majority, with 138 seats (51 percent of the 269 total seats, under the old system), while the MDP controlled 62 seats (23 percent). The Uri Party had only 47 seats (17 percent). In the April election, the Uri Party gained the majority by winning 152 seats, with 129 local district seats and 23 PR seats. The GNP slipped to 121 seats, losing the majority but retaining its standing as the main opposition party. The MDP, which took the lead in the impeachment, was decimated, winning only nine seats. The most remarkable development was the success of the Democratic Labor Party (DLP), which won ten seats, including eight PR

³ Turnout among the oldest group of Koreans, who tend to vote for the conservative GNP, dropped while rates for all the other age groups increased in the 2004 election. According to the exit poll carried out by Media Research on election day, 68.7 percent turnout rate of older Koreans aged 60 and above was 6.5 percent less than in the 2000 election. Turnout rates for younger Koreans increased, but were still low—37.1 percent for Koreans in their 20s and 56.9 percent for Koreans in their 30s. Their seniors voted at higher rates—68.8 percent of voters in their 40s and 82.6 percent for those in their 50s (*Chosun Ilbo*, April 21, 2004).

seats, demonstrating the party's national appeal. By contrast, the right wing United Liberal Democrats (ULD) won only four seats, none of them a PR seat. For the first time in Korea's history, a labor party was now represented in the Assembly; moreover it was the third largest party. This would not have been possible without the introduction of PR voting.



Graph 3: Local District Seats



These election results indicate that the party system in South Korea is converging on two major parties, the conservative GNP and the progressive Uri party. The Uri party replaced the MDP as the GNP's main rival; the GNP remains strong despite numerous setbacks.⁴ Although too early to be conclusive, it appears that South Korean politics has moved toward idealism, replacing the traditional emphasis on regionalism. While the unpopularity of the impeachment was clearly helpful to Uri's election victory, the principal reason for its success was that it defined itself as a reform party for the have-nots. Creating a reform image rather than ascribing to the radical progressivism to which many voters still object, Uri has dominated the "reform debate." While the GNP has also tried to tap into the popular demand for reform by coining the party slogan, "reform conservatism," it has largely failed to shed its establishment image.

As expected, the election results reflected voters' strong anti-incumbent mood. About 60 percent of the winners are serving for the first time. Inexperienced assembly members are viewed as less corrupt and without established ties to big businesses or interest groups. At the same time, "learning by doing" can weaken the effectiveness of the Assembly. It may not meet rising expectations for its competence vis-à-vis the executive branch. Nevertheless, the new Assembly will most likely become more politically empowered and thus more independent of the strong executive branch. The election also demonstrated the ascendance of younger politicians in the Assembly. Of the total seats, 43 percent went to candidates under the age of 50. Another new

⁴ The Uri Party gained 129 seats (53 percent of constituency seats) while the GNP gained 100 seats (41 percent), widening Uri's lead to 12 percent of the total 243 constituency seats. However, the GNP's loss to Uri in PR seats was narrowed to 2.5 percent, with the GNP gaining 35.8 percent and Uri 38.3 percent of the total PR votes (*JoongAng Daily*, April 16, 2004).

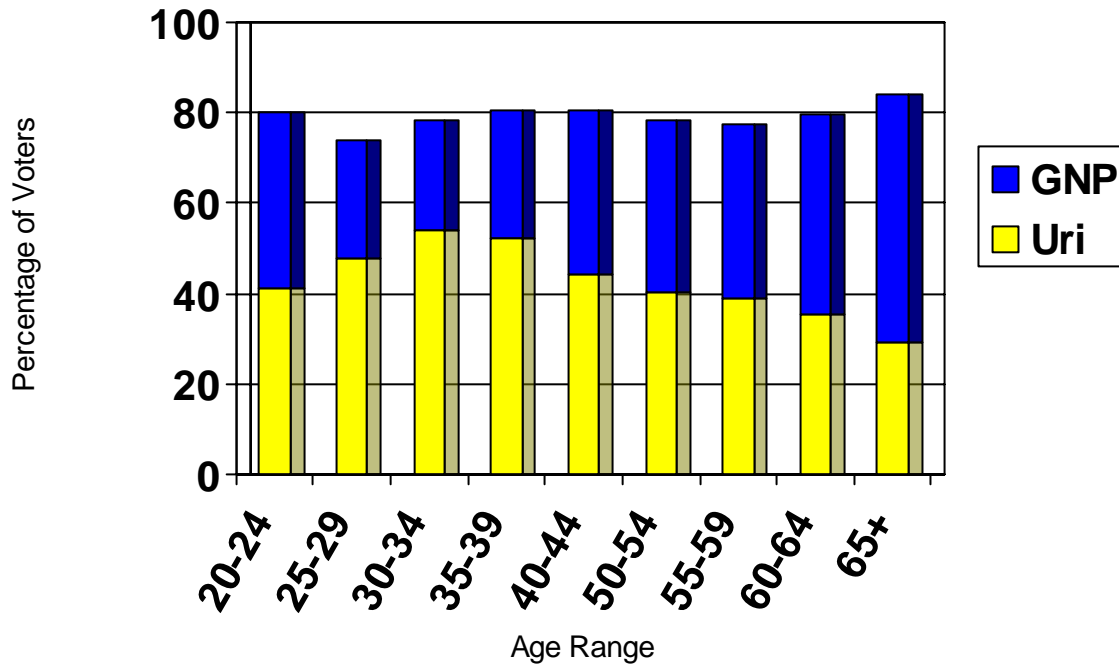
outcome is the increased female representation in the Assembly. With the new gender equality policy, there are as many female candidates as male on the PR list, helping to more than double the number of female representatives, from 16 (5.9 percent) to 39 (13 percent).

The generational factor accounted for the significant difference in party support. In the PR voting, generational differences were more important than ideological orientation. According to the Gallup Poll, support for the DLP among the younger generation (in their 20s and 30s) was three to four times greater than among older Koreans. Only about 5 percent of Koreans in their 60s gave their PR ballot to the DLP. On the other hand, 24.2 percent of Koreans in their late 20s and about 20 percent in their 30s voted for the DLP.⁵

In the local elections, a Gallup Poll of 1,686 voters taken two days after the election reveals that younger voters, in their late 20s and 30s, supported Uri Party candidates over GNP candidates by a 20-30 percent margin. On the other hand, a significantly greater number of older Koreans, in their 60s, voted for GNP candidates over Uri Party candidates. It is noteworthy that the preference for the Uri Party over the GNP does not appear to be strong in the youngest voting group, who are in their early 20s; 41.3 percent in this demographic group voted for Uri candidates while 38.9 percent voted for GNP candidates. The almost equal balance in party preference in this youngest group, who are not likely to have voted in the previous National Assembly election, indicates that progressive political orientation should not be extrapolated to all future younger generations. Progressive political activism among Korean youth may be explained better by noting that the specific age groups from late 20s to early 40s experienced their political empowerment through the democratic struggles of the 1980s followed by the successful democratic transition of South Korea in the late 1980s.

⁵ Almost nineteen percent of Koreans in their early 20s and early 40s voted for the DLP for PR seats. On the other hand, only 9.1 percent of Koreans in their late 40s voted for the DLP. The significant difference between Koreans in their early and late 40s reflects that the middle-aged Koreans who spent their university days during the active student movement decade of the 1980s, following the May 1980 Kwangju Incident, are spread between their late 30s and early 40s. Therefore, the student movement generation of the 1980s who are in their early 40s are quite different from their seniors in their late 40s.

Graph 4: Generational Split between Uri and GNP in Local Districts



Source: *Chosun Ilbo*, April 21, 2004.

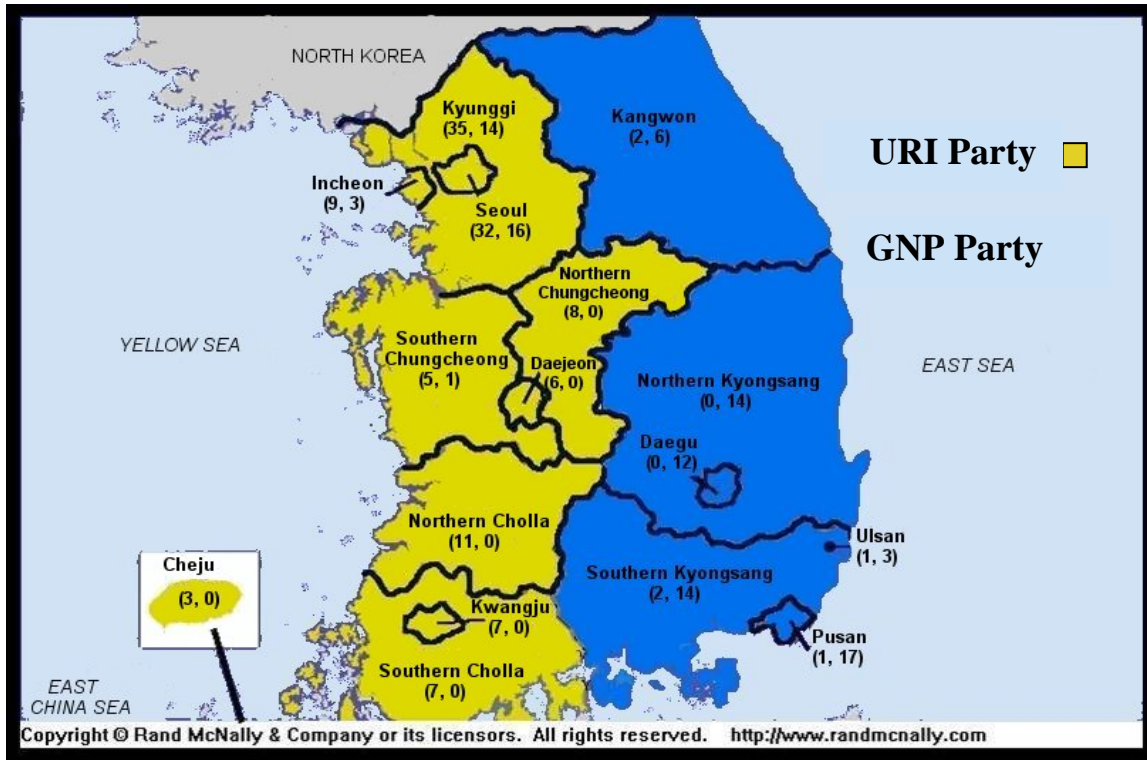
Weakening the regional influence in Korean politics has been a significant challenge since democratization occurred. Younger and middle aged voters were expected to reject regionalism in this election since they tend to have a diluted regional identity and tend to focus more on policy issues.⁶ However, a regional split is clearly revealed in the simple plurality rule of constituency seats. Many pundits predicted that the demise of the nearly 40-year-long domination by the three Kims – Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung, and Kim Jong-pil who represented the Kyongsang, Cholla, and Chungcheong regions, respectively – would also end the deep regional divisions in Korean politics. The political influence of Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung dwindled rapidly after they left the Blue House (the President’s office and residence). The end of the three Kims’ era came with the failure of Kim Jong-pil to win his own PR seat in this election, as his ULD failed to win the required five seats, or three percent of the national vote.

⁶ For example, see, “Age may trump regionalism for voters in South Korea,” by Norimitsu Onishi, *New York Times*, April 13, 2004.

Yet, a new breed of regionalism seems to be emerging. As can be seen in the following map, the “east-west split” was clear in this election, with the GNP performing well in the eastern cities and provinces while the Uri dominated the western cities and provinces. The MDP, long popular in the Cholla region, managed to win only five seats among seven local constituencies in the Southern Cholla Province, and failed to win any seats in Kwangju city, or in the Northern Cholla Province. With the exception of four seats in the southern Chungcheong constituencies, the ULD, which represents the Chungcheong region, did not win any seats in Daejeon or the rest of the region. The demise of these regional parties may be a sign of waning regionalism in Korean voting behavior. However, a true litmus test for the demise of regionalism would be to examine how GNP candidates and Uri candidates fared in “opposing” regions. It turns out that no GNP candidate won a seat in the Cholla region, and the party won only one seat in southern Chungcheong. Similarly, only two Uri candidates won in the southern Kyongsang region. Even in Seoul and Kyunggi, where large percentages of residents have moved from other regions, voters tended to favor candidates who are closely identified with their own home town.

Clearly, voters in the Cholla and Chungcheong regions saw the Uri Party as the GNP’s competitor. The GNP has long been identified with the Kyongsang region. In this way, non-Kyongsang voters added a twisted regional mandate to the Uri Party to check the GNP, which had enjoyed a majority in the previous Assembly. Regional competition in Korea’s national politics thus continues, this time with two smaller regions uniting against the powerful Kyongsang region. President Roh’s pledge to move South Korea’s capital city to the Chungcheong region was likely instrumental in forming this new coalition. One key item on the political reform agenda for President Roh and the Uri Party has been to replace regionally divided politics with a policy-oriented, cross-regional party system. Therefore, one can argue that this plank of their reform agenda has failed so far and that the Uri Party won votes by relying on a distorted form of regionalism. Although both generational and ideological factors have emerged as new fault lines in Korean politics, regionalism appears to remain a powerful force in shaping voters’ identity and ultimate voting behavior.

Figure 1: Regional Split between two Major Parties in Local District Seats



Source: *Chosun Ilbo*, April 15, 2004; *JoongAng Daily*, April 15, 2004.

A month after the National Assembly election, the Constitutional Court, South Korea's highest court, overturned the 16th National Assembly's March impeachment vote of President Roh. With this May 14 ruling, the President was reinstated. A Court majority ruled that he had indeed violated election law and the constitution but that the offense was not grave enough to warrant impeachment.⁷ The political turmoil caused by the impeachment ended up strengthening President Roh's political base and shifting the balance of power in the National Assembly. With the Uri Party now in control of the legislature, President Roh's reform agenda will enjoy significant support. The strength of the Uri party's support for the President will depend on how the current party divide between moderates and radicals is controlled.

II. *The Polarization of Korean Civil Society*

Paradoxically, South Korea's civil society is becoming increasingly polarized as democratic development progresses. A certain amount of social division, in which diverse views and interests are openly debated, is a healthy sign – indeed a requirement – of a functioning

⁷ The Court listed the following three violations: 1) President Roh violated the responsibility of the President to keep political neutrality in an election for public office; 2) his critical remarks challenging the warning of the National Election Committee violated the President's duty to observe the law and to protect the constitution; 3) his call for a referendum to ask for the public's confidence in his leadership was unconstitutional.

democracy. For South Korea, a long-oppressed society, it is easy to understand the intensity of the differing views unleashed on almost every public issue. When a society is polarized, however, it suffers dysfunctional consequences. By social polarization, we refer to a political situation in which people take extreme positions and are unwilling to tolerate opposing views, allowing little room for compromise and reconciliation.

To be sure, the polarization of Korean civil society is most apparent in public policy issues. This is quite a new development. Issues surrounding North Korea and policy toward the United States are dividing Koreans along generational and ideological fault lines. Divisiveness over contemporary public policies stems from the deeper divide created by the nation's recent history and differing visions of its future path.

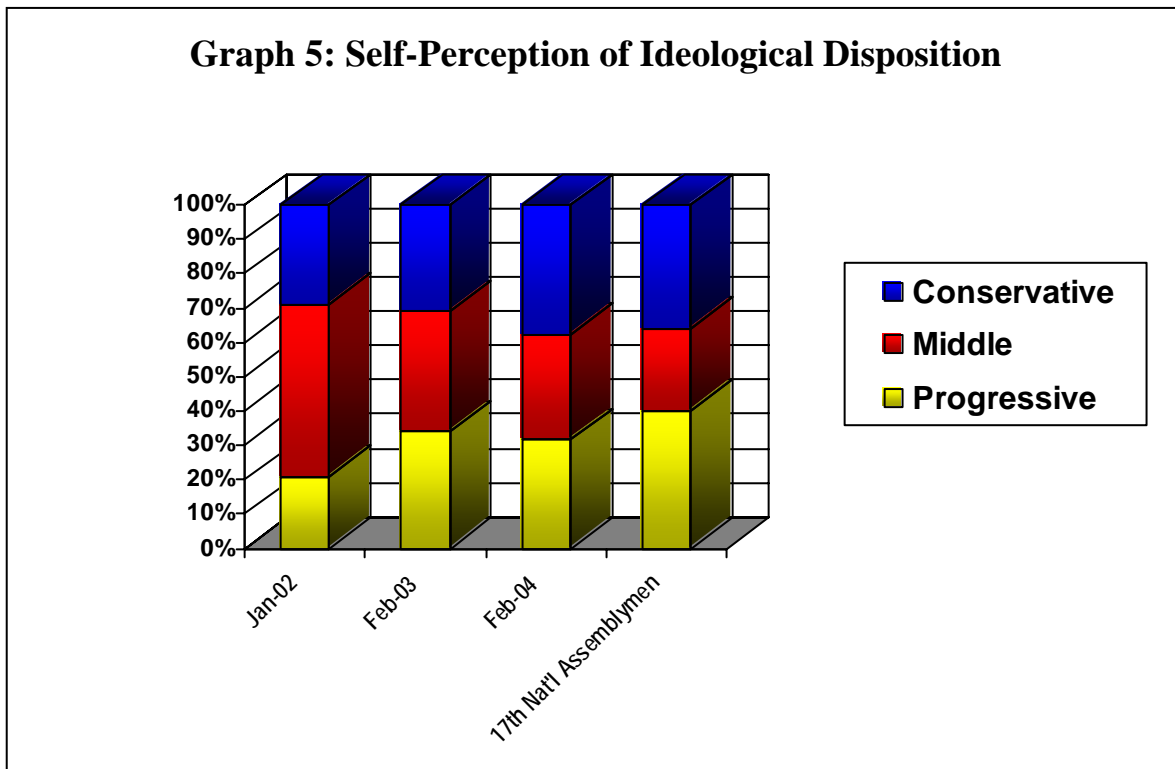
1. *The Ideological Divide*

As democratization accelerated in the early 1990s, "reform forces" began to challenge the "modernization forces" that had dominated South Korea's national agenda during the previous several decades. The modernizers are proud of South Korea's economic success thus far and tend to favor order and stability to promote sustainable growth into the future. Although the South Korean economy is the 12th largest in the world in terms of GNP, per capita gross national income in 2002 was about \$10,000, far below the levels of developed countries. Sagging growth rates in recent years are a concern for the modernization forces, as is the challenge of how to generate and sustain new wealth. They favor incremental changes over rapid reform of the existing economic and political order. With democratization and increased support for reform, the modernization forces have been put on the defensive.

On the other hand, "reform forces" demand accelerated reform. Criticizing establishment figures as "vested interest groups" or "status quo forces" resisting societal demand for reforms, they have dominated the political agenda in South Korea during the past decade. Reformers believe Korea's modernization is tainted with a shameful history and injustices; past authoritarian regimes delayed democratization by using economic development as an excuse, and growth occurred at a cost of increased economic disparities and collusion between big businesses and politicians. However, reform forces have never been clear about the politico-economic system they aim to build. Their reform agenda can best be summarized as building a participatory democracy with powerful leaders and institutions held accountable to citizens on the one hand, and social democratic ideas of protecting weaker economic constituencies (labor, farmers, and small business) on the other.

This division between modernization and reform forces is paralleled by a more general political clash between conservatives and progressives. In fact, division based on political ideology has become increasingly intertwined with regional division in Korean politics. This new division based on political ideation (the forming of ideas) has sharpened markedly in recent years. According to a poll by the *JoongAng Daily*, in early 2002, 28.5 percent of Koreans viewed themselves as conservative, 21.4 percent as progressive, and 49.5 percent as moderate. A year later, the very same poll revealed that 34 percent were progressive and 31.3 percent were conservative, while moderate responses had dropped to 34.8 percent. This poll also reveals a generational divide in ideological orientation in South Korea. The younger the person, the more

likely that he/she will claim to be progressive. Thus, 45.5 percent of Koreans in their 20s think they are progressive while 21.0 percent identify themselves as conservative. Older Koreans' responses show the opposite composition, with 43.1 percent being conservative and 22.9 percent being progressive.⁸ The most recent poll, taken in February 2004 by the same newspaper, reports that moderates dropped down further to 30 percent, while more Koreans identified themselves as conservative (37 percent) than progressive (31 percent). On the other hand, the ideological disposition of the new National Assembly members revealed the proportion of progressive-moderates-conservatives as 39.5 percent-23.5 percent-35.6 percent. With the influx of Uri Party members, the proportion of self-identified progressive Assembly members was somewhat higher than that of grass-root citizens.



Given this delicately balanced ideological divide, a progressive presidential candidate was not initially favored during the 2002 presidential election. In fact, President Roh did not have a significant political base in the MDP and many observers gave him almost no chance of being nominated as the MDP's presidential candidate. The newly introduced quasi-primary competition changed all that, however. As a self-made human rights lawyer from a poor farming family, Roh's popularity soared. He was viewed as someone outside mainstream politics, a true progressive. According to a JoongAng-EAI poll in early 2003, Roh was perceived as much more

⁸ In terms of average points, the ideological difference across age groups appears to be modest. In a 0-to-10 point progressive-to-conservative spectrum, the *JoongAng*-EAI poll shows that the average Korean in his or her 20s stood at 4.43. As age increased, the points also increased—the average scores for Koreans in their 30s, 40s, and 50s and over was 4.86, 4.88, and 5.56, respectively.

progressive than President Kim Dae-jung and certainly more progressive than his competitor, Lee Hoi-chang.⁹ A majority of Koreans thought the incoming Roh government would be different from Kim Dae-jung's government, even though Roh was a candidate from former President Kim's party. For better or worse, Korean voters supported President Roh again during the 2004 National Assembly election.

What, then, are the main policy differences between conservatives and progressives? Progressives tend to support the rights of laborers, higher taxes for the rich, and greater scrutiny of *chaebols*. Politically, they often ally with liberal NGOs, and advocate a more direct form of participatory democracy. Conservatives are cautious of further expansion of labor rights, which they fear could dampen economic growth. They also favor a more market-led, gradual approach rather than governmental regulatory intervention in *chaebols'* activities. But the differences in economic issues pale in comparison to differing views on North Korea and U.S.-related policies.

This clash of views takes on an added complexity and intensity when it comes to North Korea. At the risk of over-generalization, one may say that the progressive camp tends to be sympathetic to North Korea and support engagement policies with less emphasis on reciprocity and more on economic aid. Progressives no longer see North Korea as a major threat but as a poor kindred spirit in need of assistance. The majority in the progressive camp subscribe to inter-Korean nationalism. On the other hand, conservatives tend to be more cautious toward North Korea and view confidence-building with the North as a long-term task. Although the fear of actual invasion from the North has subsided greatly in recent years, they continue to see North Korea as a major national security threat.

Kim Dae-jung's active engagement policy toward North Korea has continued under the Roh government, dramatically transforming South Koreans' perception of North Korea. The inter-Korean summit between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il in June 2000 was a watershed event, transforming Cold War perceptions toward North Korea. This policy transformation has been led by the President and his aides rather than by social consensus. As a result, the conservative segment of Korean society has not accepted this policy change, creating serious divisions over North Korea-related issues. Occasional incidents sparked by the North, such as incursions by North Korean naval vessels into South Korean seas, has only widened differences between the two South Korean political camps. With the current nuclear crisis instigated by North Korea and the subsequent U.S. policy of CVID – complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program – policy differences on North Korea spilled over to the alliance with the U.S., with the two sides debating whether to place priority on the alliance or seek independence from the U.S. to pursue more active engagement with North Korea.

Nevertheless, ideological differences over North Korea should not be exaggerated. Differences seem modest, at least at the grass-roots level. On the question of how the South Korean government should handle the nuclear standoff, for example, self-proclaimed progressives responded to the *JoongAng*-EAI poll as follows: 46.8 percent supported “the end of

⁹ Most respondents (61.3 percent) put President Roh in the progressive range (0-4 points) of the 0-to-10 point progressive-to-conservative ideological spectrum. His average rating was 3.83. On the other hand, Lee Hoi-chang, who competed against Roh in the 2002 presidential election, was perceived as conservative, with an average score of 6.27. Former president Kim Dae-jung was perceived to be slightly right-of-center, at 5.7.

governmental economic aid while continuing humanitarian aid and private sector exchange,” and 26.5 percent were for “continuous governmental economic exchange and aid.” To the same options, self-proclaimed conservatives answered 52.0 percent and 23.2 percent, respectively. Ideological disposition appears to matter when the options are more radical. The idea that economic assistance to North Korea should be stopped altogether was supported by 16.5 percent of conservatives but only 9.1 percent of progressives. On the other hand, the idea that “economic aid must continue and both the U.S. and North Korea should yield to each other” was supported by 17.6 percent of progressives while conservative support was only 8.3 percent.

Table 1

<i>How should the Roh Moo-hyun government respond to the renewed nuclear problem posed by North Korea?</i>	Progressives	Conservatives
Ending governmental economic aid while continuing humanitarian aid and private sector exchange	46.8%	52%
Continuous governmental economic exchange and aid	26.5%	23.2%
Stopping economic exchange with North Korea altogether	9.1%	16.5%
Economic aid must continue and both the U.S. and North Korea should yield to each other	17.6%	8.3%

JoongAng-EAI, 2003

Ideological differences on U.S. policy appeared even more modest. To the question of “How should the Roh Moo-hyun government set the relationship with the U.S.?” 51.5 percent of progressives and 45.3 percent of conservatives preferred to “change the current U.S.-centered foreign policy to a more diversified policy,” while 29.7 percent of progressives and 35.7 percent of conservatives chose the option “restore the traditional strong ally relationship with the U.S. on the affairs of the Korean Peninsula.” Only 13.5 percent of progressives and 9.9 percent of conservatives were in favor of the more radical option of “alter comprehensively the current U.S.-centered foreign policy.” The option at the opposite end of the spectrum, “cooperate fully with the U.S. in all international affairs,” received support from 5.4 percent of progressives and 9.1 percent of conservatives.

Table 2

<i>How should the Roh Moo-hyun government set the relationship with the U.S.?</i>	Progressives	Conservatives
Alter comprehensively the current U.S.-centered foreign policy	13.5%	9.9%
Change the current U.S.-centered foreign policy to a more diversified policy	51.5%	45.3%
Restore the traditional strong ally relationship with the U.S.	29.7%	35.7%
Cooperate fully with the U.S. in all international affairs	5.4%	9.1%

JoongAng-EAI, 2003

Attitudinal differences across ideological dispositions widen on the issue of the U.S. troop presence. One fifth of progressives (19.1 percent) supported the idea of withdrawal or substantial reduction of U.S. troops, which is almost twice as many as the conservatives (10.4 percent). On the other hand, more conservatives supported the idea of maintaining the current size of the U.S. troops than progressives (46.1 percent vs. 36.5 percent). The proposal for a slight reduction received roughly equal support (43.6 percent of progressives and 40.5 percent of conservatives).¹⁰

Table 3

<i>How should the Roh Moo-hyun government handle U.S. forces in Korea?</i>	Progressives	Conservatives
Withdrawal or substantial reduction	19.1%	10.4%
Slight reduction	43.6%	40.5%
Maintaining the current size	36.5%	46.1%
Enlarge the current size	0.7%	2.9%

JoongAng-EAI, 2003

2. *The Generational Divide*

Much of Korea’s current political polarization is generational, between younger and older generations. The generation gap is a key to understanding attitudinal differences among Koreans. Various polls reveal that the younger generations tend to be more politically progressive and culturally liberal. The younger generations’ political activism tends to be expressed as support for domestic reform, an independent foreign policy from the U.S., and sympathy for North Korea.¹¹

While older Koreans appreciate their nation’s achievements and are comfortable with the existing order, younger Koreans are more impatient with the status quo and seek alternatives. The generational divide reflects rapid historical changes in South Korea. Younger Koreans were raised in an affluent, democratic society. Koreans, aged 60 and above, in contrast, belong to a generation who survived turbulent circumstances - poverty, colonial rule, post-independence chaos in the late 1940s, and war. Having lived through such events, they value stability and order and harbor strong anti-Communist sentiments. Such contrasting historical memories greatly widen the generational gap in political attitudes.

The Korea-U.S. relationship has faced unprecedented challenges in the past two years. The year 2002, in particular, was quite possibly the historic low point in the bilateral relationship, with soaring anti-American sentiment.¹² The year began badly with an incident at the Winter

¹⁰ The idea of enlarging the size of the U.S. troops in South Korea received meager support: 0.7 percent among progressives and 2.9 percent among conservatives.

¹¹ Lee, Sook-Jong. 2004. The rise of Korean youth as a political force. In *Brookings Northeast Asia Survey 2003-2004*, eds. Richard C. Bush et al. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 15-30.

¹² For anti-Americanism in South Korean society, see Sook-Jong Lee, “Anti-Americanism in Korean society: A survey-based analysis,” in Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies, Vol.14, *The United States and South Korea*:

Olympics that sparked an anti-American cultural rally over the Internet.¹³ It ended with “candle light protests” in response to the acquittal by a U.S. military tribunal of two American soldiers charged with the negligent homicide of two Korean schoolgirls during an armored vehicle mine-clearing exercise. The public outcry brought tens of thousands of Koreans to the downtown streets of Seoul day after day, with demonstrators mourning the deaths of the young girls while demanding a major revision to the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in Korea.

The negative image of the U.S. and the opposition to perceived American unilateralism were reflected in a 2002 Pew Research survey even prior to the candle light protests. South Korea ranked eighth among the 44 countries surveyed in terms of unfavorable attitudes toward the U.S., with higher disapproval rates than Indonesia and India. Only 53 percent of South Koreans had a favorable view of the U.S., while 44 percent were unfavorably inclined. A year later, another poll by the *JoongAng Daily* and the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies showed little change in the views toward the U.S.; of polled South Koreans, 50.1 percent felt “good” about the U.S. whereas 49.5 percent felt “bad.”

South Koreans have complex, even contradictory feelings toward the United States. On one hand, there is gratitude, fondness, and respect, both for the values and ideals the U.S. represents and for the extensive support the U.S. has provided South Korea over the last half century. At the same time however, there is a pervasive sense of resentment toward the continuous U.S. influence.¹⁴ Older Koreans tend to embrace the positive aspects more while younger Koreans lean toward the negative. This fault line exists as younger Koreans feel less threatened by North Korea compared to their fathers’ and grandfathers’ generations and are more sensitive to how South Korea is treated by the U.S.¹⁵

Most U.S. and South Korean polls conducted in recent years have shown that South Korean perceptions and attitudes toward the U.S. reveal the greatest degree of polarization across generations. Younger Koreans in particular are very critical of the United States. For the much older South Koreans who remember the cruelty of Japanese colonial rule and the devastation of the Korean War, the U.S. is viewed gratefully as a “savior.” As the perception of the North Korean threat diminished, however, Korean youths increasingly began to view the USFK as infringing on Korea’s national sovereignty rather than as a deterrent against the North.

Reinvigorating the partnership (Washington, DC: KEI, 2004), 183-204; *Anti-Americanism in Korea: Closing Perception Gaps* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2003).

¹³ The sudden burst of anti-Americanism during the 2002 Winter Olympics followed an incident at a short track skating event. A popular Korean skater and a gold medal contender, Kim Dong Song, was disqualified in the final lap, allowing an American opponent, Apolo Anton Ohno, to win the gold medal. Many Koreans, especially younger ones, felt that the “bad” call was somehow intentional, especially given the fact that it was made in response to a gesture of complaint by Ohno. An anti-Ohno homepage was immediately created and Korean ‘netizens’ vigorously protested the judge’s decision. A satirical anti-American song soon emerged and became popular even among young schoolchildren.

¹⁴ See, “The past as prologue” chapter in Eric L. Larson et al., *Ambivalent allies: A study of South Korean attitudes toward the U.S.* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2004).

¹⁵ See Lee, Sook-Jong, Generational Change in South Korea: Implications for U.S.-Korea Alliance, in *Strategy and Sentiment: South Korean Views of the United States and the U.S.-ROK Alliance*, ed. Derek Mitchell, Washington, DC: CSIS, 2004.

Although the primary blame for recent anti-American sentiment in South Korean society should be placed on the collective mismanagement of a number of U.S. base incidents, rising “assertive nationalism,” especially among younger South Koreans, is also a key factor. Korean resentment against the U.S. had always been based on the premise that the U.S. is the dominant partner, with South Korea subject to U.S. interests and pressures. The younger generation in South Korea takes pride in Korea’s economic success and democracy, and is unhappy with the perceived subjugation of South Korea’s interests to the “hegemonic” United States. They wish to see their country recognized and respected as an “equal partner” in the alliance, and are opposed to America’s unilateralism.¹⁶

On the other hand, a greater number of young South Koreans tend to view North Korea more favorably today than in the past. North Korea is increasingly seen as a legitimate partner for peaceful coexistence, rather than an aggressive enemy to be deterred. Accompanying these changes in threat perception, inter-Korean nationalism has taken hold in the hearts of many younger Koreans. The youth in South Korea are embracing the idea of South and North Korea being becoming one nation. During inter-Korean sporting events, many young South Koreans can be seen waving the blue and white flag of the Korean peninsula designed to represent unity, rather than the South Korean national flag. For those South Koreans old enough to remember the Korean War or their anti-communist school lessons, such a scene is extremely shocking. One visible corollary to the inter-Korean nationalism among South Korean youth is their increasing suspicion of U.S. motives and intervention in the Korean peninsula.

The generational divide in South Korean attitudes toward the U.S. seems greater than the ideological divide. The negative image of the U.S. is held most strongly by South Koreans in their 20s and 30s. This negative image coincides with their positive image of North Korea. The exact opposite view exists among Koreans aged 50 and over. For example, a joint poll conducted by *JoongAng Daily*, CSIS, and RAND in September 2003, reveals that over one third of Koreans in their 20s chose the U.S. as the least favored country – 35.4 percent – while only 4.1 percent chose North Korea. In contrast, Koreans aged 50 and over chose North Korea as the least favored country – 25.3 percent – while only 5.3 percent chose the U.S.¹⁷ In the same poll, 46.2% of Koreans in their 20s thought that “inter-Korean cooperation” should take precedence over South Korea’s cooperation with the U.S. On the other hand, Koreans aged 50 and over responded that cooperation with the U.S. should come before that with North Korea – 38.8 percent vs. 26.4 percent.

¹⁶ The negative image of the U.S. held by younger Koreans has not yet translated into any significant attempt to revise South Korea’s alliance. Although opinions of younger generations are skewed to “pretty important” rather than “very important,” 83.5 percent of Koreans in their 20s agreed to the importance of the U.S. forces in Korea in stabilizing Korea’s security, a number that is not too far below 95.2 percent of older Koreans aged 50 and over.

¹⁷ Although anti-Japanese feelings intertwined with the colonial history were expected to ebb, Japan was still one of the least favored countries across generations with 30.1 percent of Koreans in their 20s and 24.5 percent Koreans aged 50 and over named Japan as their least favored country.

Table 4

<i>Please tell me the country you like the least?</i>	Koreans in their 20s	Koreans aged 50 and over
U.S.	35.4%	5.3%
North Korea	4.1%	25.3%
<i>Cooperation with North Korea and the United States are both important, but which one do you think should come first?</i>	Koreans in their 20s	Koreans aged 50 and over
Inter-Korean cooperation	46.2%	26.4%
U.S.-ROK cooperation	17.6%	38.8%
Inter-Korean cooperation and U.S.-R.O.K. cooperation are equally important	34.8%	31.4%

JoongAng Daily-CSIS-RAND poll, September 2003

In the same *JoongAng*-CSIS-RAND poll, more younger than older Koreans supported timely withdrawal of U.S. forces. More than one third of Koreans in their 20s and 30s supported U.S. troop withdrawal from South Korea, while about 67 percent of them supported the idea of the U.S. staying in some form for a significant amount of time: 6.9 percent said “Stay even after reunification” and “59 percent said “Stay for a decent amount of time.” In contrast, only 8.5 percent of older Koreans aged 50 and over supported the withdrawal idea, 72.6 percent of them wanted to host the U.S. forces for a lengthy period of time, with 18.4 percent of them supporting the presence of U.S. forces even after reunification.

Table 5

<i>The U.S. states that as long as North Korea remains a threat and as long as Koreans and Americans wish, it will station U.S. forces in Korea. What is your opinion on U.S. forces in South Korea?</i>	Koreans in their 20s	Koreans aged 50 and over
Stay even after reunification	6.9%	18.4%
Stay for a decent amount of time	59.0%	72.6%
Withdrawal soon	28.5	7.2
Immediate withdrawal	5.6%	1.3%

JoongAng Daily-CSIS-RAND poll, September 2003

III. Factors Contributing to Political Polarization

There appear to be at least three sources for the current political polarization, both at the grass-roots and elite levels. One is growing economic disparities and resulting discontent. A second source is the transitional nature of contemporary politics, in which competing power elites, the media, and NGOs play active roles. A third is the weak political institutions and a political culture incapable of attenuating conflicts and restraining divisive politics so as to avoid creating lack of trust in the governing system.

1. The Economic Divide

Increasing economic disparities and a resulting sense of relative deprivation have not yet been carefully studied as factors contributing to the development of left leaning politics in South Korea. Amy Chua (2003) pointed out that globalization has widened economic disparities, as an economically dominant ethnic group gets richer at the expense of other groups. Democracy accompanies globalization, and enables marginalized groups to protest these economic disparities; as globalization has progressed, riots and political unrest have increased in many developing countries.¹⁸ As an ethnically homogeneous country, South Korea is free from ethnicity-based political confrontation. But the polarizing effects of globalization have been felt in South Korea as in other areas, particularly during the 1997-98 financial crisis and subsequent economic reform years.

Income inequality in South Korea has increased since the financial crisis. The Gini Coefficient for urban worker households suggests that income disparities have increased even in recent years. The Gini Coefficient was 0.2555 in 1995, 0.260 in 1996, and 0.254 in 1997. But it increased to 0.284 in 1998, 0.287 in 1999, and 0.293 in 2000. The increases in both low-income and moderate-income groups contribute to a worsening of the whole income distribution structure in the wake of the financial crisis.¹⁹ More recent data from the *2003 Household Survey* reveals that economic disparities have worsened. As of April 2003, the average household income among the bottom ten percent of urban salary workers was one-sixth of that of the top ten percent – 2,264,000 won compared to 13,511,000 won.²⁰ Another report revealed that the ratio of upper income households' (top 20 percent) earnings vis-à-vis lower income households (bottom 20 percent) has increased to 5.7 in the first quarter of 2004 from 4.81 in 1997.²¹ Growing unemployment was at first thought to be the main reason for this growing inequality. However, as unemployment rates have lowered during the recovery, income inequality has not decreased. Whether the widening income inequality indicates a collapse of the middle-income class is currently a controversial issue among Korean analysts.

A major lingering effect of the financial crisis has been the increased pressure on South Korea's labor market. As low growth hampered job creation, finding and maintaining employment has

¹⁸ Chua, Amy. 2003. *World on fire: How exporting free market democracy breeds ethnic hatred and global instability*. New York: Anchor Books.

¹⁹ Gyeongjoon Yoo, "Analysis on the Change and Its Cause of Income Distribution before and after the Financial Crisis: Income Mobility Perspective," Policy Studies Series 93 (Seoul: Korea Development Institute, January 2004).

²⁰ Monthly household income includes monthly wages and all other income.

²¹ *Kyunghang Daily, JoongAng Daily*, September 2, 2004.

become extremely difficult. Although South Korea was the first nation to recover from the crisis, after more than two years of painful reform measures, its corporate restructuring measures have limited job creation. One study shows that about 40 percent of middle-aged employees laid off in 1998 due to restructuring were unable to find new jobs during the subsequent five years. Many of those who managed to find new employment had to accept substantial salary reductions.²² The tight job market has been particularly harsh for new entrants. While the overall unemployment rate declined to less than four percent in the early 2000s, unemployment rates for job seekers in their late teens and early 20s has been high. As of March 2004, unemployment rates for job seekers in age groups 15-19, 20-24, and 25-29 were 16.8 percent, 11.3 percent, and 6.3 percent, respectively. Once members in this age group do find jobs, it is often as non-regular workers who cannot receive full fringe benefits. According to the May 20 report by South Korea's Statistics Bureau, under-employed people who worked less than 18 hours per week during April 2004 have increased to 130,000, from 88,000 one year earlier.²³ As a convenient way to reduce labor costs, many workplaces have been hiring either non-regular full-time or part-time staff. This issue was hotly debated during the 2002 presidential election race.

The actual unemployment rate for younger Koreans appears to be much higher than the official statistics, and the government is under heavy public pressure to improve these numbers. It is not only younger job seekers, however, who are becoming increasingly pessimistic about their future and skeptical of the status quo. Middle-aged salary workers also feel much more insecure, as more workers in their late 40s and the 50s become targeted for "voluntary retirement." Some pundits argue that these conditions encourage revolt against the existing order.

The problem of relative deprivation has intensified as real estate prices soared, especially apartments in upper middle class residential areas, despite a variety of governmental efforts to restrain them. Cheaper bank loans for the middle class encouraged speculative real estate investment and created a real estate bubble over the years. With abundant money seeking high return investments, real estate speculation went out of control, raising concerns of a bubble burst that could lead to the kind of severe asset deflation seen in Japan in the early 1990s. In addition, credit card default suddenly emerged as a serious social problem. Following the financial crisis in 1998, in an effort to revive the economy, the government actively encouraged the use of credit cards to boost consumption. Financial companies were eager to issue them, and did so with very little regard for credit risk, in some cases accepting credit card applications on street corners from people with little or no credit history. Millions of lower and middle class households went bankrupt. At the same time, savvier individuals, including employees of multinational financial companies and high-tech/information industries, emerged as the *nouveau riche*, a new class of conspicuous consumers and a new target of envy and grievance.

Widening economic disparities and increasing job insecurity certainly left many people unsatisfied with the status quo and supportive of radical change. Signs of a shrinking middle class and a growing lower class have increased public despair. According to the 2003 Social

²² Kwon Young-bin, "Middle class is falling apart." *JoongAng Daily*, May 6, 2004.

²³ The number of under-employed people had been decreasing, from 127,000 in April 2001 to 88,000 of April 2003. The sudden rise in under-employed workers in 2004 indicates that employment conditions worsened over the year due to economic depression. See *Dong-A Ilbo*, May 20, 2004.

Indicator Survey, 56.2 percent of Koreans believed themselves to be middle class, down from 60.4 percent ten years ago. The proportion of people who believe that their socio-economic status can be enhanced with individual effort and hard work decreased from 45.8 percent in 1993 to 33.1 percent in 2003. More than half the Koreans surveyed in 2003 thought that increasing economic disparities and poverty were due to bad policies and inefficient social institutions. Consequently, popular demand for socio-economic change has risen since the IMF reforms were implemented. Such demands are the fundamental reason why Korean voters were willing to experiment with new and progressive leadership. If Koreans are moving to the left-of-center, away from their past conservatism, the movement is led not so much by the appeal of leftist ideology as general dissatisfaction with the status quo.

People's aspiration for reforms related to wealth distribution and equity issues reflect their economic discontent. For example, the 2003 *JoongAng*-EAI poll demonstrated public demand for economic reform in the following areas: "resolution of disparity between rich and poor" (29.6 percent), "job security" (26.3 percent), "stabilization of the real estate bubble" (16.0 percent), and "*chaebol* reform" (11.5 percent). These numbers are far higher than such issues as "agricultural restructuring" (6.4 percent), "privatization of public companies" (5.1 percent), or "welfare expansion" (4.8 percent), or "price stabilization" (0.3 percent). Among social issues, "anti-corruption reform" (32.6 percent) and "the high cost of private education" (25.7 percent) were recognized as immediate social reform needs. On the political agenda, "collusion between politics and business" (41.3 percent) topped the list, reflecting the popular perception that this collusion is the fundamental cause of political corruption in Korea.²⁴

2. *Transitional Politics*

The Korean political system is going through a transitional stage, procedurally and substantively. First, politics has been in flux as political institutions and the democratic rules of the game undergo change. During this stage, politics in South Korea are likely to be inherently unstable. Second, change is a common goal in contemporary Korean politics. Although people cannot agree on a concrete agenda and prescription for reform, most Koreans tend to favor political change. These transitional politics involve diverse political actors; power elites, NGOs, and the media are the most visible. On the other hand, interest groups representing business, labor, and various occupational organizations are not playing any visibly significant role in the transitional politics of South Korea. Politicians also have been on the defensive, at least until the new Assembly was formed, as they were often criticized for corruption or not representing the public interest. When these major actors are involved in transitional politics, they do not speak with one voice; new power elites compete with old elites. NGOs are divided, by ideological differences among their leaders and grassroots members. News outlets range along the ideological spectrum. These divisions within each actor reflect the political polarization of Korean society itself. At the same time, they reinforce the existing polarization of Korean civil society.

²⁴ See, Lee Nae-young and Lee Ha-kyung ed., *Dilemma and choice for Roh Moo-hyun government*, East Asia Institute, 2003.

(a) Power Elite Competition

One important aspect of transitional politics is the redistribution of power and influence from conventional power elites to new elites. As competition among power elites intensifies, policy differences tend to sharpen, leading to political divisions in society. Power elites are here defined as both officials and civilians who are influential in the public policy-making process.

In the past, Korean power elites tended to be homogeneous. A large number came from the Kyongsang region. They often received their higher education in the U.S. and tended to share the goals of political stability and economic growth. Over a decade of democratization has changed the composition of Korea's power elites. Increasing numbers of former dissidents and civic activists, who opposed the traditional elites, have entered government service as democratically elected Presidents pursue institutional reforms, often at the expense of vested interests. The pace of this change has accelerated under the Roh Moo-hyun government. Distrusting mainstream elites, President Roh drew his aides and key officials from a younger generation of intellectuals and activists, most of whom had no previous public service experience. The idea of bringing in new blood is also prominent in politics, as middle-aged politicians in their 30s and 40s have become highly visible. As public mistrust of older insider politicians has grown, younger politicians are often perceived by voters as having fresh ideas and being less tainted by corruption. Many former student activists and dissidents who turned to politics after democratization claimed moral superiority over the traditional elites whom they charged with self-seeking opportunism. Their political clout increased when the liberal government took power, and they became the harbingers for the reform of Korean society. As a result, Korea's power elite is now divided between conventional elites and these newly emerging elites. Their competition for power and influence tends to sharpen their different ideational orientations. Attempts by both sides to gain the upper hand in political discourse have spilled into the public debate, contributing to social polarization.

(b) Empowerment of NGOs as a Critical Force

South Korea witnessed the growth of civic organizations throughout the 1990s. Until 1987, when President Chun Doo-hwan's authoritarian regime gave in to the massive democratization movement by restoring presidential elections, student and labor movements led the democratic struggle in South Korea. With the democratic transition achieved in 1987, a new form of civic movement has developed, with the middle class at the grassroots level and professionals such as lawyers and professors as leaders. Specialized NGOs focusing on a range of issues, such as the environment, human rights, and education, have emerged. Also, powerful NGOs taking on various public issues have led the civic movement. The *NGO Times*, which collects basic data on South Korea's non-governmental organizations, reported the total number of South Korean NGOs as 10,000 in 1996, 20,000 in 1999, and 25,000 in 2002.²⁵ Among them, about 4,000 NGOs can be classified as advocacy organizations. As South Korean political parties are not viewed as effective representatives of the public interest, these advocacy NGOs have been vital in compelling the Blue House and National Assembly to institute reforms.²⁶

²⁵ *The NGO Times, Directory of Korean NGOs* (1997; 2000; 2003).

²⁶ See Sook-Jong Lee, *Hanguk Simin Danche ui Jeong Chap Jeon Hwal-dong (Policy advocacy activities of South Korean civic organizations)*, Seoul: Sejong Institute, 2002.

A strong state and a contentious civil society had been at odds during much of South Korea's history;²⁷ democratization has reversed this trend. As every post-1987 government has been committed to democratic reforms, the state-civil society relationship has grown closer. Empowered civic organizations routinely participate in the policy-making process. But while the state and civil society have moved toward a positive coexistence, South Korean civil society itself has been fractured and contentious.

Although NGOs themselves are divided between conservative and progressive organizations, NGOs leading the civic movement tend to be progressive, with leaders who fought for democratization in the past and have connections with recent reform governments. Major NGOs are very political and take specific positions on major public policy issues. By taking positions in public debates and pushing for political and economic reforms, they have contributed to political division in civil society rather than fostering social harmony.

(c) Media Polarization

The press was censored during the authoritarian era. Past authoritarian governments did not allow criticism of their policies, and banned open debate on the sensitive security issues related to the U.S. and North Korea. The press was an effective tool for inculcating the overall pro-American and strong anti-Communist beliefs among South Koreans. The print media advocated democratic struggle only at the risk of temporary closure.

After this constraint on public media was removed with democratization, the media has become a sort of open forum where anti-government criticism is flourishing and heretofore unacceptable negative opinions about the U.S., positive opinions toward North Korea, and other ideas are expressed. Media criticism against government policy or the expression of anti-American views has ironically become a measure of proof of South Korea's democratic freedom.²⁸

The Korean media today are a microcosm of the divided civil society. The press is an integral part of political contention and reinforces political viewpoints of readers, who often subscribe to specific publications that tend to support their political views. Consequently, today's media contributes to political division within Korean society rather than providing a forum for social harmony and reconciliation.

At the same time, the public media has become a very important factor for the democratically elected government, and the President in particular, as politicians are more concerned with public opinion and their image than the previous authoritarian governments. As political leaders have become more sensitive to criticism and support from the media, recent democratic governments have tried to curb criticism and shape coverage to their advantage. For example,

²⁷ For recent development of South Korean civil society, see Charles K. Armstrong, "Introduction: Civil society in contemporary Korea" and Sunhyuk Kim, "Civil society and democratization," in *Korean society: Civil society, democracy and the state*, ed. Charles K. Armstrong, London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

²⁸ See Scott Snyder, The role of the media and the U.S.-ROK relationship, in *Strategy and sentiments: South Korean views of the United States and the U.S.-ROK alliance*, ed. Derek J. Mitchell, CSIS, 2004, 72-105.

conservative media outlets have been under fire for criticizing the policies of Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun.

Three leading mainstream newspapers, *Chosun Ilbo*, *Donga Ilbo*, and *JoongAng Daily*, control about 70-80 percent of the print media market. With their conservative tone, they often clash with the Blue House and the ruling party, who view their coverage as one-sided and anti-reform. Tensions between the Blue House and print media exploded with a major tax probe in 2001 and are likely to continue under the Roh government. President Roh himself has revealed his deep mistrust of *Chosun Ilbo* in particular, and he and his aides have pressed for media reforms.

Conflict between the media and government is intertwined with conflict between the print and broadcast media. Two major broadcasting companies, the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) and the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), are under direct government influence. KBS is a state-run company, while 70 percent of MBC is owned by the Foundation for Broadcast Culture, a government organization. Consequently, television channels that South Koreans rely on heavily for information support the government's brawls with conservative newspapers.

On the other hand, Korean youth rely heavily on Internet news outlets for information and to exchange political views. For example, *OhMyNews*, which distinguishes itself by its vocal criticism of the U.S., has attracted the attention of many younger Koreans, who are much more adept at using the Internet than older Koreans. Therefore, the generational digital divide includes a divide in terms of major sources of information and debate. While television channels are commonly watched by all generations, younger Koreans are more likely to click to their news via the Internet while older Koreans read newspapers.

3. *Weak Political Institutions*

In mature democracies, political institutions can channel public demands and attenuate conflicts. South Korea's democracy is in the process of "scrap and build." While old institutions and practices are discredited and rejected as being undemocratic, new institutions either do not yet exist or are too weak to consolidate diverse interests and conflicting views into workable policy options. Political differences tend to result in conflict and extreme polarization. There are several sources for this problem in contemporary South Korean democracy.

First of all, Korea lacks the spirit and mechanisms to uphold the rule of law. Powerful institutions and people can easily violate existing laws and rules. Sometimes reforms are hastily carried out for political gains without sufficient consideration. Popular views and interest groups press for government decisions without checking legal conditions. As the rule of law does not always prevail, trust in the current political system tends to be weak, leading to even deeper political division. Respect for the rule of law and observation of procedural democracy are badly needed in South Korea.

Second, political parties are weak and the National Assembly, ineffective. Until recently, political parties constantly realigned themselves and changed their names and were linked to strong individual leaders identified with different regions. Lacking the clear policy platforms that provide the institutional basis for a strong party system, Korea's political parties have been

ineffective in representing public demands and offering alternative policies. Consequently, the National Assembly has been weak vis-à-vis the executive branch, which is currently led by a strong president. Under these circumstances, advocacy-oriented NGOs have played a quasi-party function in representing public interests and demands. Although the National Assembly is growing stronger and more effective, it will take time before it plays a more representative role in Korea's democracy.

Third, until recently, strong regional loyalties among Korean voters constrained the elected president from claiming a majority of votes. Both President Kim and President Roh began their administrations with a minority in the Assembly, a situation which paralyzed the government. Moreover, Korean voters consistently split their votes between the President and the National Assembly. With increased competition, political campaigns have turned negative, focusing on misdeeds and portraying opponents as extremist or partisan. With a majority won by the Uri Party during the April National Assembly election, however, political confrontation between the Blue House and the National Assembly will certainly lessen.

Last, a political culture with few power-sharing mechanisms generates divisive politics, as winner-takes-all competition creates a polarized political field. The shift of power from old to new elites has not led to effective power-sharing. The office of the President has been criticized as "imperial" in pushing through some reforms, and in fact the President and his aides remain extremely powerful, creating a "win at any cost" atmosphere. The loser sets his or her sights on political retribution after the election, while the winner inevitably goes through a cycle of excesses, including corruption and nepotism, which invite even more criticism from the loser. In this "do or die" political climate, a politician is forced to take sides on key national issues, such as the North Korea nuclear crisis. This often means adopting an extreme position; he or she simply cannot afford to become a moderate. Thus, political polarization and stalemate are all but inevitable.

South Korea is at a turning point as its democracy matures and it reshapes its political geography. Many conflicts over major policy issue areas are inevitable during this transitional period. What kind of political force will prevail and how contentious politics will be reconciled are critical questions for the future of Korea. Whichever direction the changes take, they will be carried out in the name of "democracy" or "reform," which will resonate throughout Korea's civil society for the foreseeable future.

IV. Implications for U.S.-Korea Relations

While the transformation of Korea's domestic politics will have an immediate impact on a number of policy issues, there is no reason why they will inevitably lead to radical changes in South Korea's relationship with the United States. However, two issues currently facing South Korea could have potentially large repercussions. One is the deployment of South Korean troops to Iraq, a request from the United States. The other is the realignment of the U.S. Forces in South Korea (USFK).

At a national press conference on May 15, 2004, a reinstated President Roh Moo-hyun apologized to the nation about the impeachment controversy. He also made it clear that he will

vigorously pursue both political and economic reforms. While asking the incoming National Assembly to take the lead in the political reform effort, he said, “I will devote myself to managing government affairs in a secure manner so that political reform can be pushed in an orderly manner on the foundation of stable politics and government administration.” He also pledged to pursue consensus politics through dialogue and compromise with his opposition. President Roh emphasized economics as the top government priority, pledging that he will never leave the economic hardships of ordinary people unattended and that government negligence will not contribute to economic crises. While focusing government efforts on boosting the country’s long-term growth potential, he also stressed that he will not abandon economic reforms.²⁹

As this speech reveals, the Roh Moo-hyun government and the new National Assembly are likely to focus on domestic economic reforms. Farmers’ and workers’ interests will be represented more forcefully through the DLP presence in the Assembly. Further liberalization of the rice market will be opposed. Labor unions will also raise their voices. The government’s objective of a Free Trade Agreement with Japan is likely to be opposed by the industries vulnerable to tough competition from superior Japanese goods. Progressive Assembly members will try to help the many young unemployed job-seekers and improve employment conditions to protect the rights of non-regular workers, although improving labor conditions in the current economic climate will be difficult. Finally, the DLP is also trying to introduce a new tax for the rich.

On the political front, the abolition of the National Security Law is likely to be on the reform agenda. While this law was designed to prevent infiltration of North Korean spies and propaganda, due to its excessive use in cracking down on past radical student movements, progressive politicians, many of whom suffered personally under the law, will try to abolish it.³⁰ Moving the capital city from Seoul to Chungcheong province will also be a divisive issue, as the financial cost of the move appears to be extremely high, especially given the current economic situation.

An Uri Party majority, however, should not lead to immediate assumptions that the National Assembly will be radicalized. Although the party pledges ongoing reform, many Uri party Assembly members are pragmatic centrists who may balance the more ideological progressives. As the majority party, it is responsible for the National Assembly’s actions and shares public accountability with the Blue House, so its policies will likely move toward the center. On the other hand, progressive forces such as liberal civic organizations will press it to promote a progressive agenda. How the party balances such demands against the need to govern will be a big test for its leadership. The DLP, which has a more radical agenda, will pose another challenge. If Uri is unable to neutralize the DLP agenda, moderates and far-left progressives

²⁹ Blue House Briefings, “President Roh Moo-hyun’s address to the nation on May 15,” <http://www.chongwade.go.kr>.

³⁰ The ascendance of former student activists is a most notable feature of the new Assembly. Sixteen former leaders in the National University Student Council (*Jeondaehyup*) ran as Uri Party candidates, and 12 of them were elected (*JoongAng Daily*, April 16, 2004). *Jeondaehyup* is a radical student organization that has led the anti-American and pro-reunification student movement since its founding in 1987; it changed its name to the Korean Federation of University Student Councils (*Hanchongryun*) in 1993. All of the elected former activists except one have a criminal record for violating the National Security Law as part of their past student movement activities.

within the party may even split away. In that event, there will be further political party realignment based on ideological fault lines.

The Dispatch of South Korean Troops to Iraq

The South Korean government's decision to send troops to Iraq has been cited by American officials as proof of the robust alliance between the two countries. As both governments have assigned significant political meaning to this decision, the actual dispatch must proceed as planned. Nevertheless, post-election political maneuvering is likely to re-open the issue and possibly further delay the deployment.

The Korean government had already dispatched 670 troops to Iraq in mid-2003, despite strong opposition from otherwise friendly progressive civic organizations. On April 9, 2003, after a personal appeal by President Roh, the National Assembly, by a 179-68 vote, approved a bill dispatching 566 engineering troops and 100 medical workers. Most of the nay votes came from the then-ruling MDP. The liberal and progressive camps in Korean civil society have vigorously opposed the troop dispatch, arguing that the U.S.-led war against Iraq is immoral and imperialist.

Public opposition intensified when the United States and South Korean governments began consultations over the dispatch of a much larger-scale combat force to Iraq. In October 2003, Korea's National Security Council decided to dispatch 1,400 combat troops and 1,600 military engineers and medics to Iraq, the ROK's largest overseas deployment since the Vietnam War. On February 13, 2004, by a 155-50 vote, the National Assembly approved a bill for the new dispatch plan.

The dispatch has been delayed however, as the Korean government wanted to redirect the troops to an area relatively safe from the rising insurgent activities. In the meantime, public opposition in Korea increased considerably after the disclosure of Iraqi prisoner abuse by U.S. military troops. As of late April 2004, according to a *Hankyoreh* poll of National Assembly members, 119 continued to support the dispatch of troops to Iraq while 124 felt that the decision should be reconsidered by the 17th National Assembly.³¹ The DLP has made opposition to further dispatches part of its platform and vowed to raise the issue in the new Assembly.

On June 7, the controversy ended, at least in the National Assembly, as the ruling Uri Party finally resolved internal disagreements and decided to uphold the bill that was passed in the previous National Assembly, with strong support from the GNP. While upholding President Roh's commitment to dispatch troops, the Uri Party asked the government to confirm it was to support the reconstruction of Iraq, rather than in acquiescence to the U.S. request, and to do its best to guarantee the security of Korean soldiers.

The Roh Moo-hyun administration will not face a strong challenge to the troop dispatch decision since the National Assembly cannot rescind a bill ratified by the previous Assembly. As of mid-June, the issue seemed to have been resolved in the new National Assembly, as the two major parties controlling more than 90 percent of the seats supported the deployment. Any remaining political opposition to the dispatch comes from a few liberal NGOs.

³¹ *The Hankyoreh*, April 19, 2004.

As South Korean troops have been prepared to go to Iraq since mid-June 2004, the real task will be to manage any rekindled opposition after the dispatch occurs. If a significant number of Korean soldiers are killed in an attack by a suicide bomber, for example, the public is likely to demand troop withdrawal from Iraq. Liberal NGOs and politicians would lead this opposition. It is imperative for the South Korean government to prepare for this worst-case scenario.

The Realignment of the U.S. Forces in South Korea

On May 14, the same day President Roh returned to office, the U.S. government announced it will move 3,600 U.S. troops from South Korea to Iraq. President Bush called President Roh on May 17 and confirmed the decision.

USFK troop realignment had been under discussion within the U.S. government since late 2002.³² Although the Pentagon had long planned to give overseas U.S. troops a new role in the war against terror, there were no official talks held with South Korea until the spring of 2003. Initially, the South Korean government was embarrassed and denied that there was any official discussion on the matter of U.S. troops. The timing of the discussion, in the midst of the North Korean nuclear crisis, was widely considered ill-conceived. Korea's then-Defense Minister Lee Jun confirmed only on February 19 that the U.S. and South Korea would begin USFK troop realignment consultations in April.

Top South Korean and U.S. defense officials began consultations on April 8. By May 2004, eight meetings had been held. Under the title of "Future of the Alliance Policy Initiative" (FOTA), the first meeting produced a ten-point agreement, including the early relocation of the U.S. military base in Yongsan and the creation of a joint consultative body to discuss transferring wartime command of the armed forces, currently under control of the U.S.-led United Nations Command. The two sides reportedly agreed on the need to adapt the alliance to the new global security environment, to expand the Korean forces' defense role on the peninsula and beyond, and to enhance USFK's contribution to regional stability. Reduction or relocation of U.S. troops were not discussed, in view of public concern over the possibility of relocating the 2nd U.S. Infantry Division away from the inter-Korean border.³³ While the two sides agreed on the Korean forces' "selected mission" and enhanced defense capabilities, security experts interpreted the expanded responsibilities for the Korean military as preparation for the 2nd U.S. Infantry Division's eventual relocation to the south.³⁴

The second FOTA meeting, held in Seoul on June 4-5, clarified the direction of change. Defense officials from both sides reaffirmed that the May 14 summit meeting between President Bush and President Roh provided the basis for further updating the alliance for the 21st century, and agreed on the need to develop detailed modernization plans to carry out the vision of the two Presidents. They agreed to begin work on several implementation plans – capability

³² In a meeting with a Korean envoy representing the newly elected Roh government, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld had first broached the subject of relocating U.S. forces. He also told the Senate Armed Service Committee on February 13, 2003 that he was considering plans to reposition U.S. forces farther from the demilitarized zone and even to reduce their numbers (*Washington Post*, February 14, 2003).

³³ *Korea Herald*, April 10, 2003.

³⁴ *Chosun Ilbo*, April 10, 2003.

enhancement, Yongsan relocation, transfer of military missions, and realignment of U.S. forces in South Korea – with targeted completion by the next Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) scheduled for late September. The U.S. also presented its plan to invest in over 150 enhancements to the combined defense, valued at over \$11 billion over the next four years.³⁵ The meeting reiterated the fundamental goals of improved combined defense and enhanced deterrence and security on the Korean peninsula.³⁶

In response to the new plan, the South Korean government has increased its defense budget to modernize its weaponry. At the same time, President Roh began to promote a new concept of “cooperative self-reliant defense,” emphasizing enhanced self-defense capability.³⁷ South Korea’s National Security Council drew up a defense policy to expand the comprehensive alliance relationship with the U.S. while strengthening South Korea’s self-defense capability.³⁸ On May 20, 2004, the Roh administration underscored this policy shift. Following a cabinet meeting to discuss the redeployment of U.S. troops to Iraq, the government announced in a briefing that preparations for the possible reduction in the U.S. forces in South Korea had begun.³⁹ Under the “cooperative self-reliant defense” plan, South Korea’s self-defense capability will be increased while the U.S.-Korea alliance will remain intact.

In response to criticism that the Roh government had accepted the U.S. plan without sufficient assessment and consultation, the administration maintained that close consultation had occurred on redeploying the American troops from Korea as part of the U.S.’ comprehensive readjustment of its overseas troops. At the same time, the Administration emphasized a need to institute a system for advanced consultations between the U.S. and South Korean policy-makers. However, in the first week of June, 2004, just two weeks after the unilateral U.S. decision to move troops from South Korea to Iraq, the U.S. government, again without consulting, notified the South Korean government that, as part of its global deployment plan for overseas troops, it would reduce by 12,500 the number of U.S. soldiers in South Korea by the end of 2005.

As bilateral talks had been limited to the relocation issue, both the U.S. government’s plans to move 3,600 U.S. troops from South Korea to Iraq and to cut one-third of its troops in South Korea came as a surprise to the Korean public. Few Koreans seem to remember, however, that

³⁵ Washington File, Text: “U.S., S. Korean Officials Explore Ways to Enhance Security,” June 6, 2003, <http://usinfo.state.gov>.

³⁶ This point was echoed in the speech delivered by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz in front of the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry on June 2, 2003. He maintained that the effectiveness of the alliance must be guided by two principal considerations, strengthening deterrence and sustaining a strong alliance over the long run. On June 3, USFK Commander LaPorte said in a forum at the Korean National Assembly that the U.S. is planning to redeploy 6,000 of its 7,000 troops stationed in Seoul to a location south of the capital (*Korea Herald*, June 4, 2003).

³⁷ In a speech given at the March 11, 2003 commencement ceremony of the Korea Military Academy, President Roh Moo-hyun said his government would thoroughly prepare to cope with a possible realignment of USFK (*Korea Herald*, March 11, 2003). Also, at a meeting with newly promoted Korean military officials on April 21, he reiterated the need to strengthen South Korea’s self-defense capabilities to prepare for possible U.S. redeployment (*Korea Herald*, April 21, 2003). The same point was made yet again during the President’s August 15, 2003 speech commemorating liberation from Japanese colonial rule.

³⁸ National Security Council, *Pyeong-hwa pun-young kwa kuk-ka an-bo* (Peace-prosperity and national security), South Korea, March 2004.

³⁹ Blue House Briefings, “Readjustment of U.S. forces in Korea,” May 20, 2004.

on several occasions in the past, the U.S. had reduced its troops in South Korea. The first reduction was made in June 1971 as part of the 1969 Nixon Doctrine, which called for the defense of Asia by Asians. About 18,000 U.S. troops were withdrawn at that time, despite strong protest from South Korea. The second debate on further USFK reductions began during the Carter Administration, with President Carter informing South Korea of the gradual withdrawal of U.S. ground forces over a period of four to five years after his inauguration in 1977.⁴⁰ The third debate on the U.S. troop reduction occurred with the passage of the revised Nunn-Warner Act in 1990. This law called for Asian allies of the U.S. to take more responsibilities and bear more costs for hosting U.S. troops, and for gradual and partial U.S. troop reduction in South Korea and Japan. Accordingly, the U.S. administration proposed a three-stage plan over a ten-year period from 1990 to 2000. In the first stage, 6,987 U.S. troops – 5,000 ground forces plus 1,987 naval forces – left South Korea between 1990 and 1992. However, the second stage was suspended by the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1993. The whole plan was subsequently nullified by the Clinton Administration's 1995 East Asian Strategic Initiative (EASI), which announced 100,000 U.S. troops would remain stationed in East Asia.

The two governments opened discussions on USFK reductions on June 7, 2004; these talks were conducted separately from the FOTA USFK relocation talks. The South Korean government reportedly favored gradual reduction over a six-year time frame from 2007-2013. Under this scenario, reductions would begin after the USFK's 2nd Infantry is relocated to the Osan and Pyungtaek areas and in conjunction with South Korea's ten-year plan, scheduled for completion in 2013, to strengthen its self-reliant defense capability.⁴¹ Liberal NGOs have responded by advocating linking the U.S. troop reduction to disarmament, and opposing South Korea's defense budget increase.⁴² However, radical voices have not seized this occasion as an opportunity to advocate withdrawing USFK forces.

As the relocation and reduction negotiations are taking place at the same time South Korea is undergoing tremendous domestic political changes, both governments must handle this issue with utmost care and sensitivity. The U.S. government must demonstrate its continued commitment to South Korea's defense more vigorously than before. During the ongoing USFK negotiations, the U.S. government should not be perceived as the sole decision-maker. A greater challenge will fall on the South Korean government to stabilize public support for the U.S.-Korea alliance. By emphasizing the solid deterrence capability of the combined troop forces, the Korean government can ease public anxiety over the USFK realignment. At the same time, both the administration and the National Assembly must speak with one voice to ensure that the USFK troop reduction issue does not harm the U.S.-Korea alliance.

The South Korean political system is undergoing fundamental change. Regional loyalties are gradually being replaced by new idealism. Public demand for economic and political reforms has strengthened the progressive forces in recent years. During this transitional period, the overall ideological spectrum has been moving to the left, and the competition today is between the right-of-center, left-of-center, and the far left. Political parties in South Korea are likely to

⁴⁰ However, the U.S. Congress opposed this idea and President Carter lowered the size of reduction from 6,000 to 3,400 as a compromise in 1978.

⁴¹ *Chosun Ilbo*, June 4, 2004.

⁴² Civil Network for a Peaceful Korea, "Appeals for peace in Korea and Northeast Asia," April 20, 2004.

realign further in the future as the cleavages within the voting public continue to form. The opinions and policy preferences of Korean voters themselves are divided across generations and along ideational dispositions. Korean civil society is fractured, especially among extreme groups. At the same time, there are a significant number of middle-of-the-road Koreans. In addition, political divisions over certain public policies are in constant flux, responding to rapid changes in the policy environment. Therefore, the direction South Korea takes during this political transformation process is not a forgone conclusion.

Under these circumstances, it is imperative for the leadership in the U.S. and South Korea to take a long term view of the alliance. By avoiding excessive politicization, both governments should be able to redefine their alliance relationship in a way that suits their individual as well as mutual national interests. Already, policy analysts following the bilateral alliance in both the U.S. and Korea are calling for more attention to be paid to changing political attitudes in South Korea and suggesting various ideas to manage and revitalize the alliance.⁴³ These reports call for more respect for and close consultation with South Koreans and their government by the U.S. government; USFK-relationship building measures with the Korean NGO community and the media; and sensitive handling of unexpected problems, such as the accidental killing of the two schoolgirls. Some urge policy-makers to begin formulating a new rationale for the U.S.-Korea alliance that goes beyond current shared security concerns.

Until this reformulation of the U.S.-Korean alliance has taken place, ever closer consultation and mutual understanding will be needed. Public officials and opinion leaders in both the U.S. and South Korea should be prepared for worst-case scenarios. In the current political environment, some NGOs and press outlets will react strongly and negatively to damaging events. The current polarization within Korean civil society, combined with weak political institutions, is likely to complicate U.S. relations. However, the current political instability in South Korea cannot continue for long. As the costs of divisive domestic politics become apparent and the ongoing democratic consolidation progresses, Korean politics will stabilize. South Korea's relationship with the U.S. will grow increasingly stable in the future.

⁴³ See CSIS, Georgetown University, and Seoul Forum, *Strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance: A blueprint for the 21st century*, Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2003; Eric L. Larson et al., *Ambivalent allies: A study of South Korean attitudes toward the U.S.*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2004; Derek Mitchell ed., *Strategy and sentiment: South Korean views of the United States and the U.S.-ROK alliance*, Washington, DC: CSIS, 2004.