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South Korea: The Rise to Globalism

Under the American Umbrella

When the fighting ended in July 1953, the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ), established to separate the two warring sides of the Korean conflict, ran like a jagged scar across the body of the peninsula. One either side of the line lay little but devastation and misery. Seoul, the capital of the Republic of Korea in the South, was in ruins, having been taken and retaken four times in the course of the war. Most cities in the North had been flattened by the American bombing. The infrastructure of industrial life—roads, train lines, bridges, dams, factories, power plants—had been largely destroyed. Millions of Koreans had been killed, maimed, or made homeless as a result of the war. Most of those who remained alive were overwhelmed by the struggle for sheer survival. A comfortable quality of life, much less world-class affluence, could hardly even be dreamt.

South Korea after the war was one of the least promising places in the world for economic development. Cut off from the rich mineral and power resources of the North, South Korea was at best an island of agricultural subsistence. Much of its population was barely literate. Its middle class, such as it was, was minuscule and compromised by collaboration with Japan, the losers of World War II. An observer of post-colonial Asia would likely have predicted that Burma, a country similar in size to Korea but with far greater natural resource endowments, ample land for rice production, and an English-educated elite, was much better positioned than South Korea to move upward in the world economy.[1]

If its economic prospects seemed dismal, South Korea showed even less promise in the area of politics. Emerging from decades of a highly militarized Japanese colonialism, preceded by centuries of Neo-Confucian monarchy, Koreans had had little if any exposure to democratic ideas and practices. Democracy was a recent imposition of the Americans, poorly attuned to Korea's traditions, and in any case had not been imposed with much care or enthusiasm. South Korea's inevitable fate appeared to be that of an impoverished dictatorship, dependent on US aid for the foreseeable future. But to the astonishment of much of the world, South Korea ultimately escaped this grim fate. By the 1990s, it was Burma that had become an impoverished, militarized dictatorship and a pariah to much of the Western world. North Korea, which had shown greater promise in the economic realm than had the South in the early postwar years (as will be discussed in Chapter 3), had fallen far behind South Korea economically, and was even more politically barren than Burma. Many internal and historical factors, not least the legacies of Japanese colonial rule, shaped the postwar transformation of South Korea from a war-devastated backwater to a modern industrial democracy in the space of a single generation. But the indispensable and inescapable context of this transformation was South Korea's position in the postwar world system, which is to say, its role as a frontline state in the Cold War, beneath the umbrella of American aid and protection.

The Republic of Korea (ROK) benefited from having as its patron the richest and most militarily powerful country on earth, a country that pumped enormous economic resources into sustaining South Korea, and committed itself to the defense and political viability of the republic. Of course, American support alone would not have ensured the long-term existence, much less economic and political success, of the ROK: South Vietnam is a glaring example of American failure in the East Asian region, and the record of the Philippines, another American dependency in Asia, is uneven at best. But the United States established the environment within which Koreans carried out first an economic "miracle," followed by a breakthrough to sustainable democracy.

As far as military security was concerned, the United States was responsible for the very survival of the ROK, which would have lost the war to the North in 1950 without American intervention. The subsequent American defense commitment helped prevent a renewed attack from North Korea, although without going so far as to support a South Korean attack against the North, as Syngman Rhee may have wanted. From 1958 to 1991, the United States backed its defense of the ROK with nuclear weapons stationed on Korean soil. Although tactical nuclear weapons were removed under President George H.W. Bush, US military doctrine maintained the threat of a "credible" nuclear retaliation to deter a North Korean attack against the South. The United States retained operational control of military forces in South Korea, through the American-led Combined Forces Command (CFC), until 1994, when peacetime control was ceded to the ROK military. In the event of war, however, the United States would assume command of these "combined" forces.[2]

Economically, South Korea was overwhelmingly dependent on American aid from the beginning of the republic in 1948, well into the era of Park Chung Hee's military-led government (1961–1979). During this time, South Korea

received the largest amounts of US aid per capita of any country in the world save Israel and South Vietnam.[3] In the early postwar years, more than half of ROK government spending came from American assistance. The United States also absorbed the bulk of Korea's imports, at relatively low tariff rates, until the mid-1980s. America was South Korea's financial guarantor and market of last resort; without US patronage, the South Korean "economic miracle" would have emerged very differently, if at all.

Socially and culturally, the American presence was also enormous. The United States Army Military Government (USAMGIK) that ruled South Korea from 1945 to 1948 oversaw a drastic overhaul in the South Korean education system, which was rebuilt largely along American lines.[4] In the area of popular culture, South Korea was permeated by American films, music, literature, and television even more than other parts of the postwar world; in Asia, possibly only the Philippines, an outright colony of the United States for nearly half a century, was influenced as deeply by American culture as was South Korea.[5] This massive American presence encountered little overt resistance by South Koreans from the Korean War to the period of democratic transition in the mid- to late 1980s. Partly because of a widespread sense of gratitude for American involvement in the war, partly because of strongly pro-American authoritarian governments and pervasive anti-communist education, and partly because the American cultural presence was seen as preferable to Japanese popular culture (which was officially forbidden for South Korean consumption until the late 1990s), South Korea remained almost bereft of open anti-American public sentiment until the 1980s.[6] From that point onward, however, criticism of the United States became part of the landscape of Korean culture and politics.[7]

South Korea had begun asserting its independence vis-à-vis the United States in all of these areas by the 1990s. On the economic front, a series of trade disputes between the United States and the ROK in the 1980s signified the start of dramatic changes in US–Korean economic relations. From the 1980s onward Korea retained a consistent trade surplus with the United States, while the US share of Korea's exports steadily fell. By 2003 China had surpassed the United States as South Korea's largest trading partner, and was also the number one destination for South Korean investment. After a drop in the late 1990s due to the Asian financial crisis, South Korea's trade surplus with the United States expanded again, to well over $10 billion. South Korea's position as an aid supplicant and dependant of the United States would seem a distant memory by the start of the new millennium.

Just as South Korea's economic dependence on the United States had declined drastically by the end of the 1990s, so had its cultural dependence. Indeed, South Korea itself has become a major exporter of popular culture products,

especially music, movies, and television dramas. At the turn of the millennium, Korean pop culture became overnight, it seemed, the rage all over Eastern Asia, from Japan to Vietnam, and especially in "Greater China" (Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the People's Republic).[8] By the second decade of the twenty-first century, South Korean popular culture, especially music ("K-Pop"), was a global phenomenon. In the mid-1980s, the South Korean film industry was in danger of being crushed by the Hollywood juggernaut, as regulations on American film imports were liberalized. A decade and a half later, South Korea was one of the few capitalist countries in the world in which domestic films took a higher share of box office than Hollywood films. Homemade blockbusters broke one domestic box office record after another in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and for the first time Korean movies made substantial headway into the Japanese and Chinese film markets as well. While Korean films were more popular in Asia than in the West, even American and European film critics and aficionados began to dub South Korean cinema "the new Hong Kong."[9] In music and movies as in automobiles and electronics, South Korea had risen from utter dependence into the ranks of global leadership.

South Korea's political and military relationship with the United States had been a topic virtually off-limits to public debate from the Korean War onward. While the US–ROK alliance itself was not seriously questioned by South Korean governments, or for that matter the majority of the South Korean public, the nature of the alliance became the subject of criticism and growing demands for change in the post-democracy period. "Anti-Americanism," or perhaps more accurately criticism of US foreign policy in general and US relations with Korea in particular, migrated from the radical fringes in the 1980s to mainstream South Korean public opinion in the 2000s. Anti-US protests were triggered by certain specific events, such as the accidental killing of two Korean schoolgirls by American soldiers in 2002 and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003; in the winter of 2002–2003, tens of thousands of Koreans poured into the streets for candlelight vigils protesting American policies and action. Such responses, however, were a reflection of a deeper shift in Korean attitudes toward the United States. Younger South Koreans in particular viewed the United States more critically than did their elders.[10]

These new attitudes did not prevent South Korean students from remaining the largest group of foreign students in the United States, in proportion to the homeland population (only China and India, countries with twenty times the population of South Korea, had more students in the United States in absolute numbers), although by 2003 there were even more South Koreans studying in China than in the United States. But they did suggest that South Koreans would no longer view the United States universally as a benevolent elder brother, and

that the unequal nature of the US–ROK alliance, as expressed in the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the two countries' military forces, would come under scrutiny and at some point be changed.[11] While no mainstream politician could advocate terminating the US military presence in South Korea outright, Lee Hoi-chang lost the 2002 presidential election in part because he was portrayed by his opponent, Roh Moo-hyun, as too pro-American. While the succeeding conservative administration of President Lee Myung-bak stressed again the closeness of US–Korea ties, even among South Korean conservatives, the old, reflexively pro-American political establishment no longer monopolized the scene. Whatever the US–ROK alliance would evolve into, the patron–client dependent relationship of the previous sixty years was no longer tenable.

Economic and Political Transformations

"Korea, inc."—1961–1985

While the US umbrella provided the context in which these transformations took place, indigenous factors made such transformations possible. In the economic area, a powerful centralized state set on rapid, export-oriented modernization—the "developmental state," political scientists have called it— played the leading role.[12] South Korea's rapid industrialization, the so-called "miracle on the River Han," was a collaborative effort of government and big business, with government firmly in command.[13] This collusive model was established in the early 1960s, under the military regime of Park Chung Hee, and produced spectacular returns in GNP growth until the mid-1980s. It began to falter in the late 1980s and went through a slow, difficult transition in the 1990s. The 1997 Asian financial crisis, which threatened to undermine the entire South Korean economy, seemed to be the final blow to the Korean high-growth model. But South Korea recovered more rapidly and more completely than any of the other countries affected by the regional financial crisis. While the days of double-digit GNP growth were gone forever, the domination of the *chaebŏl*, or large business conglomerates, a product of the rapid industrialization period, persisted into the new millennium. South Korea seemed uncertain whether its future lay in neo-liberal free market reform or some new system of formal cooperation among business, government, and perhaps other social elements such as organized labor.[14]

This strong state was not a holdover of Korea's traditional "Oriental Despotism." During the Chosŏn dynasty (1302–1910), the central government as embodied in the king had been relatively weak vis-à-vis competing bureaucratic interests.[15] The Japanese colonial regime in the 1930s and early 1940s, under the virtually dictatorial control of the Governor-General, established the proximate model for South Korea's state-led industrialization.[16] Not by coincidence, the rapid industrialization process of the 1960s and 1970s, under the direction of ROK president and former Japanese imperial army officer Park Chung Hee, strikingly resembled its predecessor in wartime Japan: an authoritarian state dominated by the military; large diversified business groups or conglomerates (*zaibatsu* in Japanese, *chaebŏl* in Korean—the same Chinese characters with different pronunciations); and reliance on abundant supplies of cheap labor.[17] George E. Ogle, among others, has argued that the South Korean system of labor relations derived directly from the Japanese *sampo* system that had subordinated workers to the war effort.[18]

International factors also played an important role. In addition to the general contribution of American aid and patronage, the American war in Vietnam specifically gave a tremendous boost to the South Korean economy. The contribution of more than 300,000 Korean combat soldiers to Vietnam—by far the largest non-US foreign military force involved in the war—was repaid with generous US civilian and military subsidies, totaling more than one billion dollars between 1965 and 1970.[19] Perhaps more importantly in the long run, South Korea's heavy industries took off substantially due to war procurements for Vietnam. Hyundai Construction, Hanjin Transportation, and other leading conglomerates were relatively small concerns until the Vietnam War windfall. While the ROK exported primarily labor-intensive light consumer goods to the United States and Japan, it exported over 90 percent of its steel and over 50 percent of its transportation equipment to Vietnam in the late 1960s.[20] Even so, South Korea's take-off might not have been sustained after the fall of Saigon and the severing of ROK–Vietnam economic ties, had the same big businesses not moved into the next lucrative foreign market: construction in the oil-producing countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Hyundai, Daewoo, Hanjin, and other Korean companies set up factories in, and shipped tens of thousands of workers to, the newly rich but underdeveloped countries of the region, especially Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Libya. This move was both highly profitable for these businesses and also helped secure oil supplies for South Korea's own industrialization program.

Another key external factor in this period of economic take-off was Japan. In 1965 the ROK and Japan normalized relations, despite widespread protests in South Korea. One condition of normalization was that Japan would give South Korea some $800 million in compensation for damages incurred by its colonial domination, an enormous sum for South Korea at the time. South Korea was opened up to Japanese business, and in the early 1970s Japan

surpassed the United States as the largest foreign investor in Korea (it was to lose that position to the United States again later). Much of South Korea's foreign technical assistance came from Japan, at a time when Japanese production was the most efficient in the world.[21] Technology transfer also played a key role. Entire industries that were declining in Japan, such as steel and shipbuilding, and entire plants for these industries, were shifted to South Korea, and the Koreans became global leaders in many of these industries.[22] Japan was important in yet another, less tangible way: as Korea's model and competitor. As a Hyundai executive who had run his company's programs in the Middle East remarked to me, "We were obsessed with beating Japan. That drove us to work harder and put all our efforts into creating the most efficient, most productive industries we could. Catching up with and surpassing Japan was our goal."

The Rise, Fall, and Recovery of the Korean Economy

The economic results of this state-led industrialization process were remarkable, even if the authoritarian nature of Park's regime was widely criticized in the outside world and faced considerable discontent within South Korea. In the 1970s, for example, GNP grew at an average annual rate of 9 percent and exports by 28 percent. Heavy industry rapidly expanded its share of South Korea's economic output, from 40 percent in 1971 to 56 percent in 1980.[23] A country with a per capita income of $100 per annum in 1961, at the time of Park's coup—on par with India, less than that of Sudan, and one-third that of Mexico—had by the end of 1996 a per capita annual income of over $10,000 and joined the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the club of rich nations based in Paris.[24] But the model began to falter in the mid-1980s, during the regime of General Chun Doo Hwan, South Korea's second successive military president.

After Chun came to power in 1980, South Korea began gradually to liberalize its economy under strong outside pressure, primarily from the United States. Korean markets were opened to US imports, tariffs were relaxed somewhat, and government control of big business declined (after one last spectacular example of state power over business in 1985, when Chun refused government loans to the Kukje *chaeböl* and the company collapsed). The 1980s were also a period of unprecedented labor disputes under the authoritarian regime, and workers' wages sharply increased even if their rights remained severely restricted. In short, the "developmental state" was losing ground to both the *chaeböl* and to organized labor. Moreover, the Chun regime's authoritarian ways were deeply unpopular, and the government faced strong pressure from

below for democratization. The loss of state power relative to both big business and popular forces for democratization continued after the fall of Chun in 1987; the growing autonomy of the *chaeböl* in the era of democratization was perhaps most dramatically expressed in the presidential election of 1992, when Hyundai founder Chung Ju Young ran for president and won 16.1 percent of the vote.[25]

The Korean "miracle" faced its greatest challenge in late 1997, when South Korea became caught up in the financial crisis that swept through Eastern Asia from Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Indonesia, Thailand, and South Korea were hit the hardest. In November, the South Korean stock market plunged, as did the value of the won; Moody's Investment Services lowered Korea's credit rating from A1 to A3; foreign reserves began to flood out of the country. In 1998, South Korea's GDP fell by nearly 7 percent. The International Monetary Fund responded with an emergency rescue package amounting to some $55 billion dollars, the largest loan in the IMF's history.[26] The role of the IMF in the Asian financial crisis was and remains controversial. Some leading economists, including Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz, have argued that South Korea successfully recovered precisely because it *didn't* follow all of the IMF's advice, including raising exchange rates and shedding excess capacity.[27] Whatever the case, the South Korean economy recovered faster and more fully than that of other countries hit by the crisis. The economic contraction had been completely reversed within two years: according to Bank of Korea statistics, in 1999 GDP growth was 9.5 percent, in 2000 8.5 percent, and thereafter growth remained steadily positive, at around 3 percent per annum through 2005.[28] This was a far cry from the breakneck growth of the roaring 1970s, but an impressive recovery from the near-catastrophe of the late 1990s.

As South Korea entered the new millennium, the model that had guided the country from desperate poverty to first-world affluence was undergoing fundamental revamping, a process under way long before the 1997 crisis, although that crisis brought the problems of the economic miracle into sharp focus. Korea did not drift or decline for long; soon the country's business and government leaders were embarking on new, ambitious projects to expand further the South Korean economy for a new age of globalization and regional integration. South Korea, as always, was on the move. No country in the world has industrialized as quickly and as extensively as has the Republic of Korea. It is the first country since Japan to move from the periphery of the global economy to advanced industrial status, and did so in a single generation. On the other hand, political progress did not always coincide with economic development, and was anything but smooth.

Authoritarianism and its Discontents

If South Korea's economic prospects looked bleak in 1953, its political future looked no better. When US forces occupied South Korea and helped establish Korea's first Republic in the late 1940s, Korea did not appear very promising soil for cultivating democracy. The previous thirty-five years of Japanese colonial rule had been characterized by a harsh, militarized exploitation of the Korean people. Before that, Korea had been ruled for centuries by a centralized Confucian monarchy and bureaucracy, modeled on those of imperial China. In short, Korean political traditions were strongly authoritarian and elitist. These traditions persisted well into the modern period. To be sure, there was a countervailing tradition of grassroots populism, dramatically expressed in the Tonghak ("Eastern Learning") peasant uprising of 1894–1895, and its political offshoots.[29] There were attempts at political and social reform from above during the short-lived coup of 1884 and the *Kabo* (1894) reform movement of the mid-1890s, both supported by Japan and both followed by conservative reactions. The Western-educated, American-leaning leaders of the Independence Club (1896–1898) promoted a cautious democratization within a monarchical context.[30] But Korea was barely on the road to constitutional monarchy, much less popular democracy, when Japan annexed the peninsula in 1910. Western-style democracy was viewed with suspicion by the Japanese authorities, and any advocacy of Soviet-style socialism, which began to attract some Koreans in the 1920s as an alternative, was ruthlessly crushed. The latter in any case was not terribly democratic to begin with, and after the Korean War any organized left-wing movement was effectively eliminated in South Korea.

Despite this heavy-handed state repression, the tension between an authoritarian leadership and a populist opposition remained strong for the first four decades of the Republic. These decades were characterized by long periods of authoritarian rule punctuated by brief moments of popular upheaval, in 1960–1961 and 1979–1980. Finally, in the late 1980s South Korea underwent a dramatic transformation from military government to civilian democracy, beginning with the downfall of President Chun Doo Hwan. Unlike previous democratic breakthroughs that ended the autocratic governments of Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee, only to be followed by new authoritarian regimes, the democratic breakthrough of the late 1980s showed signs of permanence. In 1992, long-time opposition figure Kim Young Sam was elected the first civilian president in over thirty years, as the representative of a political coalition with the previous ruling party. In 1997, pro-democracy activist Kim Dae Jung was elected president in the first peaceful transfer of power from the ruling party to the opposition South Korea had ever experienced. In 2002, Kim's protégé Roh Moo-hyun was elected in a closely fought contest with the conservative opposition leader Lee Hoi-chang. In 2007 the election of Lee Myung-bak brought conservatives back to power, and in 2012 Park Geun-hye—daughter of military strongman Park Chung Hee—was elected the first female president of the Republic, also from the main conservative party. Despite a number of outstanding problems, democracy seems firmly consolidated in South Korea.

The First Republic of Syngman Rhee was democratic on paper but highly authoritarian in practice. Moreover, it was seen as blatantly corrupt by much of the South Korean public. In the spring of 1960, a rigged election and a harsh crackdown on anti-government protest triggered a series of large demonstrations that led to Rhee's resignation and exile. This event came to be known as the "April 19 Student Revolution," as students and teachers took the lead in these protests. After a year of political tumult under Prime Minister Chang Myŏn, a military coup led by Major General Park Chung Hee took control of the Republic in May 1961. Park was as authoritarian as Rhee, if not more so, but unlike Rhee he was not seen as personally corrupt, and more importantly launched South Korea on a path of rapid economic development that eventually created the "miracle on the River Han."

While Rhee's ideological vision had been largely negative— anti-communist and anti-Japanese—Park was, as we have seen, committed to a more positive vision of national wealth and power through economic development. His conscious model was Japan. A graduate of the Manchurian Military Academy and a former lieutenant in the Japanese Imperial Army, Park had been deeply impressed by Japan's strength as a military force and its rapid economic growth of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Park was especially interested in the origins of that growth in the Meiji period (1868–1912). In 1972, Park revised the ROK Constitution to give himself virtually dictatorial power, and called this new constitution the "Yushin Constitution"—Yushin ("Revitalization") being the Korean pronunciation for the same characters used in the Japanese term for the Meiji Restoration (*Meiji Ishin*).

The economic fruits of Park's developmental regime were apparent by the end of the 1960s, but Park's authoritarian ways finally led to his downfall. In the early 1970s, a series of external and internal shocks—the US "Nixon Doctrine," accompanying the wind-down of American forces in Vietnam, which signaled a reduction in US defense commitments in Asia; the OPEC oil embargo and global recession, damaging the Korean economy and helping to slow exports; and the ROK presidential election of 1971, in which opposition leader Kim Dae Jung won over 40 percent of the vote despite Park's enormous leverage over the electoral process—weakened the political and economic bases of Park's government. Park responded by declaring martial

law in 1972. Finally, Park was assassinated by his own chief of intelligence in October 1979.

Park's assassination was followed by another period of political confusion, with Prime Minister Choi Kyu-hwa playing a transitional role analogous to that of Chang Myŏn after Syngman Rhee's abdication in 1960. This time, however, the window of civilian rule was even briefer than in 1960, and within two months of Park's death, on December 12, 1979, Major General Chun Doo Hwan led a mutiny against the military leadership. Assisted by his military academy classmate Roh Tae-woo, who brought in his Ninth Army Division that guarded the invasion routes from the North, Chun's loyalists occupied strategic parts of Seoul and defeated the old regime military in a matter of hours. Still, Chun had not yet declared himself leader of the country. The hopes for democracy were high during the "Seoul Spring" of 1980, and the two major opposition leaders under Park, Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam, along with Park's former crony Kim Jong Pil, attempted to rally political support behind them. But in April 1980, Chun declared himself head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, Park's most notorious instrument of coercion and social control, and moved the country toward martial law. Protests erupted throughout the country, especially on university campuses in Seoul and other major cities. In the southwestern provincial capital of Kwangju, Kim Dae Jung's native stronghold, Chun decided to teach the protestors a violent lesson. On May 18, the protests in Kwangju were brutally put down by elite Special Forces paratroopers. The crackdown led to a popular local response that became a full-scale insurrection, and for a few days the city of Kwangju was ruled by local citizens' councils, beyond the reach of the central government. On May 27, the army moved in. The result was a massacre whose full extent may never be known, but which resulted in as many as 2000 civilian deaths.[31]

The bloody suppression in Kwangju would haunt Chun for his entire presidency.

The Democratic Breakthrough

In justifying dictatorship in the name of economic development, Park Chung Hee had once said, "Food comes before politics. Only with a full stomach can one enjoy the arts and talk about social developments."[32] As a matter of fact, South Korea had a vibrant political and cultural life long before economic takeoff, even—perhaps especially—in the impoverished post-Korean War years of the mid- to late 1950s. Poverty did not prevent thousands of South Koreans from publicly demanding, and attaining, the resignation of Syngman Rhee in 1960. But the protestors of the 1950s and 1960s were for the most part a small,

educated minority. By the 1980s, however, the democratic movement had become much more widespread. Their stomachs now full, South Koreans in ever-increasing numbers were willing to confront the political and economic injustices of their society.

The democratic movement of the 1980s, culminating in the extraordinary events of June 1987 that brought hundreds of thousands of South Koreans into the streets to protest against the Chun Doo Hwan regime, involved a broad coalition of social groups, professions, and classes. Students, intellectuals, and religious leaders played a prominent role, as they had in earlier anti-authoritarian protests. Middle-class, white-collar professionals joined as well, with their own demands for political and economic rights, particularly unionization.[33] But constituting a critical new element in the democratic movement were the blue-collar workers, a more visible, vibrant, and militant labor force than South Korea had ever seen before. This was a direct product of the country's rapid industrialization.

A strong labor movement emerged in South Korea shortly after liberation in 1945; a left-wing umbrella organization that attempted to coordinate this movement, the National Council of Korean Trade Unions (Chŏnp'yong in its Korean abbreviation), came into sharp conflict with the US military government and South Korean police. The Americans and their Korean supporters created an alternative and more pliable organization, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (Noch'ong) in 1946. Both Rhee and Park suppressed any labor organization that attempted to be independent of state control. Under Park, however, the process of industrialization inevitably created a rapidly expanding population of factory labor workers that the government could not control except with increasing force and brutality.

If there was one event that signaled the birth of a new militant labor movement, it was the self-immolation of Chŏn T'ae-il, a young garment-factory worker, in November 1970. Chŏn set himself on fire to protest the abysmal working conditions that underlay the economic miracle, and his death triggered a new awareness of labor issues within broader South Korean society. Students, intellectuals, and religious activists had long criticized the authoritarian regime on political grounds, but now such dissidents turned to workers as well and sought to link the movement for democracy to that for workers' rights.[34]

Like the Russian *Narodniks* of the nineteenth century, South Korean students went to work in factories under assumed identities, risking prison and even their lives, to agitate and organize the workers. The word *minjung* (popular masses) became the general term for the broad anti-government coalition of workers, farmers, students, dissident politicians, and religious activists. This

"Minjung Movement" dominated intellectual discourse in the late 1970s and 1980s.[35]

By itself, the labor movement was a major disruption to the collusive state-led development model of "Korea, Inc." Like his predecessors, President Chun tried to suppress independent labor organization, but found it impossible to do so. The number of labor disputes exploded in 1987, with nearly 4000 disputes—more than in the previous twenty-five years combined.[36] This worker unrest, alongside the large and sometimes violent student demonstrations that occurred regularly on almost every university campus from the Kwangju incident onward—well-publicized in the Western press—created an environment of ever-growing protests that were a clear threat to Chun's authoritarian rule. To complicate matters, Seoul was to host the summer Olympics in 1988. The protests threatened to undermine Chun's attempt to use the Olympics to showcase Korea's economic achievements and his own leadership.

Chun's instinct, we can probably safely assume, was to meet these protests with violence. Unlike in Kwangju, however, this time the United States was not going to stand by and let Chun commit a massacre. In February 1987, the US State Department, through Assistant Secretary of State Gaston Sigur, made it clear to the Chun government that the United States would not support a violent crackdown on the protestors.[37] In June 1987, General Chun announced that he would step down and hold elections before the 1988 Seoul Olympics, not after as he had previously declared. Chun's announcement was followed by a presidential election in which the two major opposition figures, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, both ran, splitting the opposition vote and essentially handing the election to Chun's chosen successor, former General Roh Tae-woo, who won the presidency with less than 37 percent of the vote. Despite its limitations, however, the 1987 elections represented a milestone in South Korea's transition to democracy, and President Roh would play an important role in laying the groundwork for future democratization.

The change of political leadership in South Korea in the late 1980s and 1990s was accompanied and promoted by new forms of civil associations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Collectively, these organizations constituted an emerging civil society, engaged with and yet apart from the political system. Few countries in the world surpassed South Korea in the number, extent, and involvement of civil society groups, which often played key roles in advocating and enabling the political involvement of ordinary citizens.[38] Throughout the 1990s, South Korea witnessed the rapid growth of such associations, including environmental movements, religious

organizations, organizations of students, workers, and farmers, and political watchdog groups.

By the end of the 1990s there were literally thousands of NGOs operating in South Korea. Among the more well-known activities of these groups has been the monitoring of public officials, campaigning for judicial reform and economic justice, and "disqualification" of candidates deemed unfit to run for office. Grassroots mobilization was made even more rapid and efficient in the early 2000s through the use of the Internet, as South Korea attained one of the world's highest per capita rates of broadband usage. "NGO" became part of almost daily South Korean vocabulary; Kyung Hee University in Seoul established what may be the only Department of NGO Studies in the world.

In December 2002 Roh Moo-hyun, a self-taught human rights lawyer and protégé of Kim Dae Jung, won the presidency over his conservative rival Lee Hoi-chang, helped in part by a highly effective, Internet-based "get out the vote" campaign among young Roh supporters. Although his margin of victory was relatively narrow, just over two percentage points, Roh's take of the total vote (48.9 percent) was higher than that of any of his three predecessors (see Table 2.1). In this sense, Roh had a stronger mandate than any previous democratically elected South Korean president. Yet, Roh's policy directions and his sometimes provocative ways (as well as, perhaps, his status as an outsider to the political establishment) irked many of South Korea's politicians, including those in his own party, the Millennium Democratic Party (MDP).

Within a year of coming to office, Roh bolted from the MDP and formed his own party, *Yŏllin Uri Tang* or "Our Open Party" (commonly known as "Uri Party"). In March, an overwhelming majority of the National Assembly voted to impeach President Roh on charges of campaign corruption and violating the national election law. The impeachment was opposed by a substantial majority of the South Korean public, and the National Assembly elections of April 15 were widely seen as a referendum on the impeachment. If so, Roh was roundly vindicated: Roh's Uri Party won a majority of seats in the National Assembly, the conservative Grand National Party was reduced to minority status, and the MDP was trounced, falling from fifty-nine to nine seats in the legislature. Shortly thereafter, the Constitutional Court declared Roh's impeachment invalid, and Roh resumed the presidency.

Roh continued as president until the end of his term in 2008, but his popularity and that of the progressives aligned with him steadily declined. In the presidential election of December 2007, Roh's former Minister of Unification, Chung Dong-young, was trounced at the polls by the conservative candidate Lee Myung-bak, whose share of the vote was almost double that of Chung (49 percent to 26 percent).

Table 2.1 South Korean presidential election results, 1987–2012

1987 candidate (% vote)	*1992 candidate (% vote)*	*1997 candidate (% vote)*	*2002 candidate (% vote)*	*2007 candidate (% vote)*	*2012 candidate (% vote)*
Roh Tae-woo (36.6)	Kim Young Sam (41.4)	Kim Dae Jung (40.3)	Roh Moo-hyun (48.9)	Lee Myung-bak (48.7)	Park Geun-hye (51.55)
Kim Young Sam (28)	Kim Dae Jung (33.4)	Lee Hoi-chang (38.7)	Lee Hoi-chang (46.6)	Chung Dong-young (26.1)	Moon Jae-in (48.02)
Kim Dae Jung (27)	Chung Ju Yung (16.1)	Rhee In-je (19.2)	Kwon Yong-gil (3.9)	Lee Hoi-chang (15.1)	
Kim Jong Pil (8.1)	Bak Ki-wan (6.3)			Moon Kook-hyun (5.8)	
				Kwon Young-ghil (3)	

Sources: Samuel S. Kim, unpublished paper, 2004 (with permission of author); Central Election Commission http://info.nec.go.kr/ (accessed February 14, 2013).
Candidates receiving less than 1 percent of the vote not included.

Problems of Democracy

Despite—or perhaps because of—the speed and depth of democratic consolidation in South Korea, a number of outstanding problems in the political system remain divisive and contentious. Among these are the underdevelopment of the political party system and the widespread public perception of cronyism and corruption among the political elites; the persistence of regional differences and divisions among the electorate; a sharp generational divide; and a re-evaluation of Korea's relations with North Korea and the United States.

If civil society was highly developed in South Korea, political society could still be seen as rather backward. Rather than represent any consistent ideology or platform, political parties have tended to be loose coalitions of individuals centered around a leading figure or boss, and thus shifted and realigned with great fluidity. But the 2004 National Assembly elections may have augured a more stable two-party system, with the Uri Party (soon to evolve into the Democratic United Party or DUP) and the GNP (later renamed the Saenuri dang or "New Frontier Party") representing a broad left- and right-of-center coalition, respectively.[39] Since then the left–right constellation in Korean politics has further consolidated. In the 2012 presidential election no third-party candidate won as much as 1 percent of the vote, for the first time since democratic elections had been held.

Strong regional identification in voting patterns had been a consistent element of South Korean politics since the 1960s, when Park Chung Hee began the practice of focusing economic development in, and drawing political and business elites from, his native Kyŏngsang region in the southeast, at the expense of the restive Ch'ŏlla region in the southwest (which was also the home region of Kim Dae Jung).[40]

In presidential elections from 1971 onward, Kyŏngsang natives voted overwhelmingly for the candidate from their home region, Ch'ŏlla natives for theirs. Chun, also a native of Kyŏngsang, continued Park's practice of home-region favoritism. By the 2002 presidential elections, however, this regionalism had become identified with political parties rather than native candidates. Even though Roh Moo-hyun was a native of Kyŏngsang, most Kyŏngsang voters voted for Lee Hoi-chang in 2002, while a similar proportion of voters in the southwest chose Roh. The parties they represented, the Grand National Party and the Millennium Democratic Party (later the Uri Party), tended to draw their base from the Kyŏngsang and Ch'ŏlla regions respectively. In Seoul, where a quarter of South Korea's population resides, voters leaned toward Roh and the Uri Party, but often identified with their ancestral home regions.

Figure 2.1 President Park Geun-hye, elected December 2012

Outside Seoul, South Korean politics remained very much split along regional lines into the Roh presidency. Similar voting patterns emerged in the 2007 and 2012 presidential elections, with the Kyŏngsang region backing the conservative candidate and the Ch'ŏlla region (and Seoul, in the case of 2012) supporting the progressive candidate.

As more and more of the post-Korean War generation came to political maturity, the generational differences among the South Korean electorate became more pronounced. The core supporters of Roh and his party tended to come from the so-called "386" generation (people in their 30s or early 40s who went to university in the 1980s and were born in the 1960s), and almost half of the National Assembly members elected in 2004 were under age 50. Compared to their elders, this generation that came of age in the democratic upheavals of the 1980s tended to be more liberal on political, social, and economic issues, less hostile to North Korea, and more independent-minded regarding South Korea's relations with the United States. The conservative supporters

of the GNP, on the other hand, tended to be over age 50. The attitudes of the rising generation dominated political opinion: according to a 2004 newspaper poll, when asked their political orientation, 40.5 percent of South Koreans claimed to be "progressive," 30 percent "moderate," and only 25 percent "conservative."[41]

With the Roh–Lee presidential contest, South Korea's relations with the United States and North Korea entered into the political debate in a way that was impossible before. Previously, these relationships were simply taken for granted: the United States was South Korea's friend and patron, North Korea the enemy. But now, partly because of the rise of the younger generation to the scene, many South Koreans began to express a more complex view of both relationships. Roh Moo-hyun's promise to distance himself from US policy helped his candidacy in the 2002 election, while Lee Hoi-chang's image as being too pro-American was detrimental to his. Roh's policy of engagement with North Korea had strong, though not universal, domestic support, and the relatively hardline US policy under George W. Bush was sometimes seen as an impediment to this policy. South Korea's decision to deploy troops to Iraq in 2004, though backed by Roh himself, was viewed unfavorably by many of his supporters. Few in South Korea openly questioned the necessity of a military alliance with the United States, but the relationship began to play a new role in South Korean domestic politics, and strains in US–South Korean relations were much in evidence by the mid-2000s.

On the other hand, the election of Lee Myung-bak of the Grand National Party in 2007 indicated a shift of the pendulum back to the conservative side. Lee came into office vowing to be closer to the United States and tougher on North Korea than his two predecessors, Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo-hyun. Although Lee was faced with a major test of his pro-US position in the first few months of his presidency, as thousands of Koreans took to the streets protesting US beef imports, US–South Korea relations became exceptionally close during Lee's term in office. Lee's successor Park Geun-hye, elected in a hard-fought race with progressive candidate Moon Jae-in (Roh Moo-hyun's former chief of staff) continued conservative domination of the presidency. But despite Park's comfortable margin of victory (51 percent to Moon's 48 percent) South Korea remained politically divided along regional and generational lines. Park's strongest base of support was in the Kyŏngsang region and voters over 50, while Moon's support was concentrated in the Ch'ŏlla region and voters under 40. Many younger South Koreans had supported the independent candidate, Internet entrepreneur Ahn Cheol-soo, who pulled out of the race at the last minute.

The Culture of "Compressed Modernity"

The extraordinarily rapid transformation of South Korea's economy and society, at a speed and scale probably unprecedented in human history, has been dubbed "compressed modernity" by a Seoul National University sociologist.[42] In effect, the degree of socioeconomic change experienced by Europe over the course of two centuries, or by Japan in the space of sixty years, was in South Korea compressed into three decades. The cultural aspects of this compressed modernity have been less explored than the economic ones. Certainly, South Korea in the early twenty-first century could not be considered a "conservative society," if by conservative one means resistant to change. If anything, South Koreans embraced change, especially in the technological area, more than most Western societies. Among the most striking changes were urbanization and the rise of consumerism.

South Korea in the early 1960s was a predominantly rural, agricultural society; thirty years later it was overwhelmingly urban, with Seoul by far the largest population center in the country. Like London, Paris, or Tokyo, Seoul is the political, financial, and cultural capital as well as the nation's largest city. But to a degree greater than Britain, France, or even Japan, South Korea is a country centered on its capital. In 1949, Seoul comprised just over 7 percent of the population of South Korea; in 1990, the proportion was almost 25 percent, and in absolute numbers the city had expanded sevenfold (Table 2.2). If we include the new "satellite towns" and suburban communities whose members commute to Seoul for work, metropolitan Seoul may comprise as much as 40 percent of the population of South Korea.

With rapid industrialization and urbanization came new economic practices in everyday life, and in particular, an urban lifestyle oriented toward consumer comforts. South Koreans, emerging from a cultural tradition that placed a high value on frugality and disdained conspicuous consumption, for a time

Table 2.2 Seoul population, 1949–1990

Year	*Seoul population*	*% of national population*
1949	1,466,000	7.2
1960	2,445,402	9.8
1970	5,433,198	17.3
1980	8,364,379	23.3
1990	10,627,790	24.8

Source: Adapted from Laura C. Nelson, *Measured Excess: Status, Gender, and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 36. With permission.

reacted to the rise of consumer culture with a popular backlash against "excessive consumption." Over-consumption (*kwasobi*) was commonly pointed out as one of the leading ills of South Korean society in the 1980s and early 1990s.[43] But as a high-growth economic model based on personal savings and export-oriented industry gave way to a liberalized economy focused more on domestic spending and consumption, frugality lost much of its caché. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, one of South Korea's biggest economic problems was excessive credit card debt.

These increasingly rapid changes in South Korea could be bewildering. Although South Korea remained one of the most male-dominated societies in the world in terms of political and business leadership, gender relationships were not immune to this compressed process of change. Divorce, relatively rare in the postwar period, shot up, and South Korea attained one of the highest divorce rates in the world. At the same time, birth rates plummeted; by the early 2000s South Koreans were having children below the replacement rate, and South Korea had surpassed Japan as the world's most rapidly aging society. As the society urbanized, a disproportionate number of single men remained in the countryside, and as a consequence by 2004 some 27.4 percent of rural South Korean men married foreign women.[44] Foreign workers, most from China and Southern Asia but some from as far away as Central Europe and West Africa, came by the hundreds of thousands to find economic opportunity in South Korea. Long considered by Koreans and foreigners alike an ethnically homogeneous society, South Korea was becoming far more ethnically diverse and multicultural than ever before.

Paradoxically, while South Korea faced these cultural challenges, Korean popular culture underwent a renaissance. In the 1990s, South Korea opened up not only to American cultural imports, but also to Japanese, the latter a much more sensitive issue. The import of Japanese films, magazines, television programs, and other cultural products had been banned since the Republic was founded in 1948, although a thriving illegal trade in such goods continued, in plain sight of anyone who walked past the Japanese magazine shops in the Myŏngdong commercial district of Seoul. But beginning in 1998, President Kim Dae Jung lifted the ban on such imports in stages, until by 2004 trade in cultural products carried on without any significant hindrance. Far from leading South Korea down the slippery slope to a second cultural assimilation by Japan (after the colonial assimilation policies of the 1930s), as critics of cultural opening feared, this cultural opening worked very much in South Korea's favor.

One of the most unexpected developments in South Korea's globalization at the turn of the twenty-first century has been the success of its popular culture

as an export commodity. The so-called *Hallyu*, or "Korea Wave," was a term coined by the Chinese media to refer to the explosive growth in popularity of South Korean films, television programs, pop music, and fashions throughout Asia, especially Japan, China, Taiwan, and Vietnam.[45] Backed financially by major South Korean companies and promoted by the government, the Korea Wave found fervent, even fanatical, followers in the East Asian region and beyond. Housewives from as far away as Honolulu came on group tours to visit sites filmed in their favorite Korean soap operas. Korean actors became household names in Japan. South Korean pop bands outdid the biggest American acts in popularity in China, and when visiting the country received welcomes reminiscent of The Beatles in their heyday. Vietnamese schoolgirls tried to imitate the make-up and hairstyles of their favorite South Korean singers and actresses.

Big business underwriting and South Korean government support certainly helped raise the Korean Wave, but these alone could not explain Hallyu's success.[46] Clearly there was something about South Korean popular culture that struck a chord with young people across Eastern Asia and the Pacific. This was the first time Korea had ever been a leader in cultural trends in the region, and whether the Korea Wave had staying power or was simply a flash in the pan was anybody's guess. Well into the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, Hallyu could be seen as a key element in the growing cultural integration of the East Asian region.[47]

By the second decade of the century, the Korean Wave was moving beyond Asia and making serious inroads into the European and North and South American markets as well. This new development, sometimes called "Hallyu 2.0," was centered more on popular music rather than film and television. K-Pop stars began to gain large followings among Western audiences for the first time. The biggest and most unexpected success in K-Pop was the explosive popularity of the song "Gangnam Style" by the singer Psy (Figure 2.2). The video of the song went viral in the summer and fall of 2012, becoming the most-visited video on YouTube to date and inspiring fans, imitators, and parodies all around the world. For better or worse, "Gangnam Style" put K-Pop in the global spotlight as never before. Korea was now unquestionably an important player in the global pop culture industry.

South Korea as a Global Power

Until the close of the twentieth century, Korea had never in its modern history been a major economic or political force in the East Asian region, much less the world at large. Yet despite the continued division of the Korean peninsula

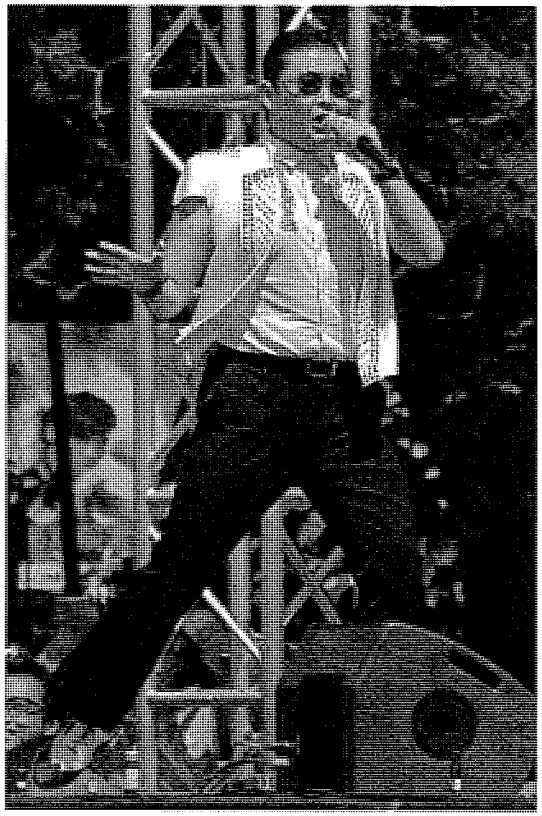

Figure 2.2 South Korean pop singer Psy

and the uncertain security environment in Northeast Asia, South Korea on its own has become an important country in the global economy, ranking twelfth in the world in overall national GDP. Its cars, mobile phones, and televisions have become name-brands throughout the world; its popular culture has swept over the East Asian region and beyond; and, only a few decades removed from deep dependence on foreign aid, South Korea has established its own aid and development program for assisting Third World countries. While lacking the superlative assets of its immediate neighbors—the population of China, the economic strength of Japan, or the military might of Russia—South Korea had achieved global clout disproportionate to its relatively small size.

At its outset, the Roh administration sought to focus on South Korea's role as a key force in regional economic integration, what it called Korea as the "hub economy" for Northeast Asia. In his inaugural address in February 2003, Roh said:

> In this new age, our future can no longer be confined to the Korean peninsula. The Age of Northeast Asia is fast approaching. Northeast Asia, which used to be on the periphery of the modern world, is now emerging as a new source of energy in the global economy.

Korea's position at the center for Northeast Asia had long been bemoaned as the reason for Korea's weakness and victimization by stronger powers. Now, Roh declared, this very position would be to Korea's advantage.

> The Korean Peninsula is located at the heart of the region. It is a big bridge linking China and Japan, the continent and the ocean. Such a geopolitical characteristic often caused pain for us in the past. Today, however, this same feature is offering us an opportunity. Indeed, it demands that we play a pivotal role in the Age of Northeast Asia in the twenty-first century.

First and foremost, Korea and the Northeast Asian region as a whole would be propelled by economic growth.

> Initially, the dawn of the Age of Northeast Asia will come from the economic field. Nations of the region will first form a "community of prosperity," and through it, contribute to the prosperity of all humanity and, in time, should evolve into a "community of peace." For a long time, I had a dream of seeing a regional community of peace and co-prosperity in Northeast Asia like the European Union. The Age of Northeast Asia will then finally come to full fruition. I pledge to devote my whole heart and efforts to bringing about that day at the earliest possible time.[48]

The new South Korean government, in other words, sought to capitalize on its location at the center of one of the most dynamic regions in the global economy. With Japan as the world's second-largest economy, fitfully emerging from a "lost decade" of stagnation in the 1990s and in discussion for a free trade agreement with South Korea, and China, the world's fastest-growing economy and both Korea and Japan's top investment market, the three countries comprised an increasingly integrated regional economy. In the area of security, a region divided for decades by Cold War confrontation was coming together, paradoxically perhaps, over the North Korean nuclear issue, which created the opportunity for six-way security discussions involving South and North Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States. For over a century, Korea had been a bystander as more powerful countries decided on the peninsula's fate. Now, with the Six-Party Talks begun in 2003 over the North Korean nuclear crisis, the two Koreas were active participants, alongside their regional neighbors and the Americans, in negotiating a peaceful outcome to the confrontation on the peninsula. The Roh government went so far as to suggest that South Korea could play the role of a mediator in disputes between Japan and China, and between North Korea and the United States. The era of Cold War dependency, with Korea as a pawn in Great Power politics, was clearly changing.

This change was intimately connected with, and grew out of, South Korea's expanding economic power, first expressed politically in the so-called Northern Policy, or *Nordpolitik*, of president Roh Tae-woo in the late 1980s. Roh sought to use his country's economic leverage to break out of the Cold War impasse and establish political relations with communist countries in Eastern Europe and Asia, and ultimately to engage with North Korea. The strategy worked: beginning with Hungary in 1986, one East European country after another recognized the Republic of Korea. The Soviet Union itself established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1990, and China, North Korea's closest ally, followed suit in 1992. As for North Korea, Pyongyang and Seoul signed an agreement on exchange and reconciliation in 1990 and a declaration for a nuclear-free peninsula in 1991; the two Koreas were on the verge of a summit meeting when the nuclear crisis and the death of Kim Il Sung in July 1994 halted progress in North–South relations for the next several years.

Under President Kim Dae Jung, Seoul worked to cultivate good relations with all three of its major Northeast Asian neighbors, the United States, the European Union, and North Korea. With Japan, issues over Japan's militaristic past notwithstanding, South Korea engaged in active cultural exchange, trade, and tourism at levels unprecedented in the two countries' sometimes fraught relationship. Entering the new millennium, Japan and South Korea began discussions on a Free Trade Agreement. The "China boom" that South Korea had experienced since the early 1990s continued and deepened, and South Koreans put the largest share of their investment, literally and figuratively, into a rising China. Culminating in Kim Dae Jung's so-called "Sunshine Policy" of engagement with North Korea, the long-delayed inter-Korean summit finally took place in Pyongyang in June 2000.

As impressive as these gains were, South Korea still faced limits to its influence and position in Northeast Asia, much less the world as a whole. Its population was far smaller than that of Russia or China, even if its economy was larger than Russia's and more advanced than China's; in any case, given China's extraordinary economic growth, reminiscent of "Korea, Inc." in its heyday but on a far larger scale, South Korea's technological lead over China was not likely to last forever. South Korea's economy was still far smaller than that of Japan and would remain so for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, as technology transfer to China accelerated, South Korea ran the risk of losing out

between low-wage China and high-tech Japan. Pinning hopes on Korea as a "gateway" to China, as the Songdo Ubiquitous City project attempted to do, held no guarantee of success. As for the Korean peninsula itself, improvement of relations with North Korea, lessening the security risk of North–South tensions while avoiding an East German-style collapse of the North, which could devastate the South Korean economy, could only proceed in tandem with improved US–North Korean relations. But the United States, especially under the Bush administration, took a more critical and confrontational approach to the North Korean nuclear issue than did South Korea. Seoul's ability to influence Washington's policy toward the North, given the enormous power and different priorities of the United States, was limited.

Even with South Korea's immediate neighbors, the picture was not entirely rosy. Disputes over Japan's perceived insensitivity about its past aggression toward Korea, expressed in textbooks that downplayed Japanese atrocities in World War II and the Prime Minister's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine where numerous war criminals are interred, regularly stirred up popular outcries and government protests in South Korea, as in China. Relations between China and South Korea had their own problems. A historical dispute over the ancient kingdom of Koguryŏ—whether it was "ethnically" Korean, as Koreans believed, or part of China, as the Chinese claimed—led to a major diplomatic row in 2004.[49]

It was in its relations with the United States that the most visible changes in South Korea's regional and global position were evident in the early 2000s. Strains in this relationship came out into the open over the US troop presence in Korea, bilateral trade, the war in Iraq, and above all how to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis. After more than a year of negotiations, all six parties to the multilateral talks over the nuclear issue agreed on a joint statement of purpose in September 2005.[50] But in reality, the goals and tactics of South Korea and the United States regarding North Korea diverged considerably. Such differences were probably inevitable, as the Cold War confrontation that created the US–South Korean alliance ended both globally and, in a more subtle way, on the Korean peninsula itself. A patron–client relationship born out of the post-World War II settlement and the Korean War was evolving, sometimes painfully, into something else. Exactly what was not entirely clear. The Republic of Korea and the United States remained military allies and economic partners. But South Korea was not the destitute, peripheral, unstable regime the United States had rescued from destruction in 1950. While perhaps not yet a "whale," South Korea could no longer be called a "shrimp."

The return to a more overtly pro-American administration in 2008 did not change the new facts on the ground in and around South Korea. China, not

the United States, was South Korea's most important economic partner and Seoul could not risk alienating Beijing by always siding with Washington. The younger generations in South Korea, with no memories of the Korean War or national poverty, were more skeptical of US interests and less fearful of North Korea than their elders. While still allied with Washington, South Korea was moving toward a position of greater independence and influence in the East Asian region and the world.