Changing South Korean Perception of the United States Since September 11

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Introduction

South Korea used to be a country where the slogan of “Yankee Go Home!” would be rarely heard. The United States was South Korea’s role model and window to the world. It was the United States that liberated Korea from Japanese colonial domination and protected South Korea from the North Korean communist invasion in 1950. The presence of American troops in the South and the provision of credible deterrence forces further enhanced the American image as a benevolent guardian. The United States played an equally important role in transforming the South Korean economy. While American military assistance considerably eased South Korea’s defense spending burden, its systematic policy intervention was instrumental in shaping an export-led growth strategy that was vital to its economic miracle.

However, the ROK-U.S. alliance of 50 years has been experiencing unprecedented strains. The tragic death of Hyosun and Misun, two Korean middle school girls, by an American armored personnel carrier in June 2002 and the subsequent rise of widespread anti-American sentiment in South Korea have overshadowed the joy and celebration of a 50-year relationship. Cries of “abandon the U.S.” are on the rise in South Korea, which have in turn precipitated in kind responses from some conservative elements in the U.S., who call for the U.S. to “abandon South Korea.” Conflicting views between the two allies on how to handle the North Korean nuclear problem have further complicated and even worsened Seoul-Washington ties. Although President Roh Moo-hyun’s reconciliatory gesture during his visit to the United States in May 2003 contributed to defusing the negative spiral of “mutual abandonment,” the inertia of uneasy bilateral relations still remains.

Central to this development is the banmi (anti-American) attitude prevalent in South Korea. But there is nothing new about banmi, since it has recently become widespread throughout the world.1 Anti-American sentiments or attitudes from South Korea have persisted since the days of the first encounter with the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century, and they are likely to continue in the future. Their scope and depth are not fixed, but vary over time, depending upon overall social ambience, actors, and issues.2 Thus, it seems grossly misleading to identify banmi as the dominant, fixed national mood in South Korea. Banmi is only one aspect of South Korea’s national psyche, as there is in fact a variety of Korean words describing the perception of the United States, ranging from sungmi (worshiping the U.S.) to hyommi (loathing the U.S.). Nevertheless, the position of American

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foreign policy since September 11, coupled with growing bilateral policy discords, have contributed to the deterioration of the American image in South Korea.

This essay aims at understanding the changing nature of South Korea’s perception of the United States. The first part of the essay traces the evolutionary dynamics of changing Korean perceptions of the United States. The second part examines the current South Korean perception of the United States and elucidates its determinants. The third part discusses how September 11 and the Bush doctrine have affected the American image among Koreans. Finally, the essay suggests some policy alternatives to improve America’s image in South Korea.

Divergent Perceptions of the United States in South Korea

Korean perception of the United States has been neither fixed nor monolithic. Rather it has changed over time, depending on the overall context of Korea’s global, regional, and bilateral relations. At the time of port opening in the late nineteenth century, the image of America in Korea was extremely polarized between reformists and conservatives.3 While reformists had a very favorable image of the United States, conservatives portrayed it as a barbarian nation.4

“Associate with the U.S.” (yonmi: 聯美): Korean reformists in the late Yi dynasty were greatly influenced by Hwang Jun-hon, a Chinese diplomat stationed in Tokyo in the late nineteenth century, who wrote Chosun Chaekryak (Chosun’s Strategy). Hwang was the first person who suggested the importance of yonmi (associate with the United States) in Korea’s survival strategy. Acutely sensing imminent threats arising from Russian expansion, he advised Koreans to “become friendly with China (chinjoong, 舍中), make ties with Japan (結日), and associate with the United States (聯美)” Hwang believed that “Korea could get help and avoid disasters if it turned the United States into a friend,” because the United States was rich and strong, civilized, fair, and righteous in deterring the strong while supporting the weak. Moreover, since the United States was geographically far away from Korea, it was less prone to interfere with Korea’s domestic affairs.5

Several Korean reformists of the time echoed a similar sentiment. Hong Young-shik, who visited the U.S. as the first Korean delegate in 1883, and Park Jung-yang, who opened the first Korean diplomatic mission in the U.S. in 1898, submitted positive reports on the United States to King Ko Jong. Their reports, along with the Hansung Sunbo, a leading reformist newspaper of the time, contributed to the favorable portrayal of the United States. For them, the United States was a country of tolerance and righteousness. The United States was rich because its per capita income rose from $230 in 1840 to $990 in 1880, six times faster than the United Kingdom. It was also considered a strong nation with its enormous military potential. The United States was a trustworthy and brotherly country, not only because of its willingness to help Korea in case of intervention by foreign powers but also because it warmly received Korean delegations.6

This positive image notwithstanding, there were some skeptics among the reformists. Yoo Gil-joon is a case in point. Yoo went to the United States as a member of the first Korean delegation in 1883 and remained in the U.S. for two and half years. Upon his return, he published an influential book, Seoyu Gyunmun (Travel Journal to the West), in 1895. Although he made positive remarks on the United States with regard to its material abundance and civilization, Yoo was critical of the American republican political system, favoring instead a monarchical one. He also differed from Hwang Jun-hon on the country’s strategic importance. He believed that Korea could benefit from the United States as a trading partner, not as a military and political ally, because of its isolationist policy and geographic
distance. Yoon Chi-ho represented another example of the mixed opinions regarding the U.S. Yoon was the first Korean student to spend five years in the U.S. (1888–93). He argued that there was a lot to learn from the U.S. in terms of humanism, civilization, morality, and freedom, but its racial prejudice was an intolerable vice, preventing him from endorsing the United States. In fact, Yoon was haunted by the specter of racial discrimination after he returned to Korea, making him an extreme anti-American during the Japanese colonial period. He even believed that Japan’s Pacific war was a noble cause for correcting American arrogance and racial prejudice.6

Meanwhile, the conservatives’ perception of the United States was outright hostile. As with earlier seclusionists, they likened Americans to beasts and Western barbarians who did not appreciate basic courtesy and morality.7 It seems well worth citing Lee Man-son’s Ten Thousand People’s Petition to the King (Manminso). In his petition, Lee maintained that American Christian missionary works must be rejected because they were bound to erode Confucian ethical codes. He also refuted Hwang’s idea of associating with the United States. According to him, the United States was no different from Russia because they were barbarians, and there was no need to ally with one barbarian, the U.S., to fight against another, Russia.8 Conservatives took a fierce anti-American stance, not only because of anticipated backlash effects on the tradition and power base of Confucianism that buttressed the Yi dynasty but also because of the imprudent and provocative American behavior shown through the General Sherman warship incident in 1866, in which sailors engaged in the killing of innocent citizens and ransacking of properties in Pyongyang.

During the Japanese colonial period, Korean perceptions of the United States were also rather mixed. Despite the fact that the United States lent its support to national independence fighters in the U.S., such as Rhee Syngman, Ahn Chang-ho, and Phillip Suh, anti-American sentiments were pronounced among the elite and masses. The Katsura-Taft Agreement in 1905, in which the U.S. tacitly approved Japan’s influence over the Korean Peninsula, accelerating its annexation of Korea, obviously triggered anti-American sentiment among Koreans. Three incidents further deteriorated Korean perceptions of the United States.

The first was related to the Wilson Doctrine. Wilson’s doctrine of self-determination for weak states inspired Koreans under Japanese colonial rule to seek self-determination and independence, precipitating the March 1 Movement in 1919. Nevertheless, Korean delegates attending the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 did not receive any support from the United States. The second was the Washington Naval Disarmament Conference in 1921–22, which made Japanese colonial rule over Korea a fait accompli through the Quadruple Agreement between the U.S., the U.K., France, and Japan, leaving Koreans all the more disillusioned with the United States. Lastly, the penetration of socialist influence into colonized Korea in the 1920s, coupled with the advent of the Yellow Peril, led Koreans to regard the U.S. as an economic imperial power.9

Pro-American perception (chinmi: 親美): However, since 1945 the American image in Korea has radically altered. The chinmi view became widely shared among Koreans. During this period, the United States was perceived as a liberator of Korea from Japanese colonial rule. The United States was also the principal sponsor of the founding of the Republic of Korea in 1948 after a three-year trusteeship. More importantly, it was portrayed as the savior of South Koreans by saving them from the North Korean military invasion and assuring their security through the patronage of military alliance. Most Koreans believed that whereas the ROK-U.S. alliance, the forward presence of American troops, and military assistance provided the South with a credible security umbrella, American economic assistance and guidance to an export-led economic growth strategy laid the foundation for its economic miracle. It was in this context that chinmi (a pro-American stance) began to dominate the
national psyche.

The development of the chinmi stance was rather natural among South Koreans because of structural dependence on the United States. Realizing that American disengagement and withdrawal of American forces could critically undermine South Korea’s security posture, most South Koreans have extended strong support for the ROK-U.S. alliance, along with holding a favorable image of the United States. The same can be said on the economic front. American markets were the primary destination for South Korea’s exports in the 1960s and the 1970s. South Korea could not have accelerated its export-led growth without relatively easy market access to the United States. Thus, the pro-American stance can be seen as a product of its economic gains from the United States. Apart from this, the American cultural influence, institutional emulation, and massive economic and humanitarian aid helped to shape a favorable image of the United States.

“Worship the U.S.” (sungmi: 崇美): Proximity to the United States through missionary connections, American education, and/or the mastery of English was the surest way to achieve social upward mobility in the post-liberation era." Some South Koreans even worshiped the United States (sungmi). They regarded American ideas, values, and power as deus ex machina. Their love of America was almost blind, as the special treatment of American forces in South Korea was virtually taken for granted, often allowing them to enjoy special status above the rule of law. Regardless of the ruling and opposition parties, Korean politicians were desperate to get American endorsements and blessings. They went to Washington, D.C. in order to have photo sessions with American politicians, because showing their American connection was an important electoral asset toward winning constituent support. The American ambassador in Seoul was powerful enough to be the only counterpart to the president of South Korea. While American-educated scholars dominated South Korean educational institutions, proximity to American military officers was vital to the promotion of South Korea’s military personnel, especially in the 1950s.

The United States, which replaced the old role of China, became the center of the universe for South Koreans from the 1950s. A new form of sadaejuui (事大主義: flunkeyism or worship the great) radiated toward the United States. Whatever was American was Western and therefore universal. Those who fell into the category of sungmi even found their existential meaning in association with the United States. For them, the United States was indispensable to South Korea’s survival, prosperity, and international status. Chinmi and sungmi emerged as new norms and beliefs for many Koreans from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Rise of anti-Americanism (banmi: 反美): However, the consolidation of chinmi and sungmi could not prevent the rise of anti-American sentiments. Progressive forces continued to blame the United States for national division, systematic suppression of leftist groups and artificial implantation of pro-American conservative forces, economic dependence through an aid-based economy, and persistent support of authoritarian regimes. The first overt signal of anti-American sentiment (banmi) surfaced in the 1970s. The American decision to pull out its seventh division in 1971 as part of the Nixon Doctrine, the increasing American critique of the Yushin regime and human rights violations in the South, President Jimmy Carter’s plan to withdraw American forces in 1977, and Washington’s efforts to abort Seoul’s nuclear weapons plan precipitated anti-American sentiments among Park Chung-hee and his conservative followers. Nevertheless, the anti-American sentiments of the Yushin establishment were not shared by a large segment of the populace. On the contrary, the dissident movement circle formed a subtle coalition with liberal forces in the U.S. in fighting the Yushin dictatorship. It is ironical to note that the Park Chung-hee Yushin regime took an anti-American stance, whereas the masses adhered to a pro-American posture.
Nevertheless, the 1980s opened a new social landscape. Visible and massive anti-American sentiments began to be widely shared by South Koreans in the wake of the Kwangju Uprising in 1981. The American failure to deter the deployment of Korean combat forces under its operational control to Kwangju and the subsequent large number of civilian casualties carried out by combat forces dispatched by Chun Doo-hwan precipitated extensive anti-American sentiments. They were further intensified because of the Reagan administration’s expedient endorsement of the Chun Doo-hwan regime. During this period, the United States was portrayed as the guardian of an authoritarian regime, severely tarnishing its image as well as engraving banmi in the national psyche of South Koreans.

Trade conflicts between Seoul and Washington in the second half of the 1980s were another source of anti-Americanism. Having experienced record high trade deficits with South Korea, the United States not only exerted enormous outside pressure for market opening in the agricultural and service sectors but also employed a variety of measures to correct South Korea’s unfair trade practices through antidumping decisions, imposition of countervailing duties, and quantitative restrictions. The American trade offensive enraged South Koreans. According to a survey conducted in 1988, 46.6 percent of 1,000 respondents identified trade pressures, especially on the opening of the agricultural markets, as the primary source of anti-Americanism, followed by the Kwangju incident (27.4 percent), unruly behavior of American athletes during the opening ceremony of the Seoul Olympics (8.4 percent), and the presence of American forces (3.9 percent).13

**From Anti-American to loathing the U.S. (hyommi: 嫌美):** In the late 1980s banmi even devolved into hyommi (loathe the U.S.), manifesting itself through a mass media campaign on “ugly Americans.” The primary target was American soldiers stationed in South Korea. Their misbehavior was exaggerated by the Korean mass media. The secondary target was Korean-Americans, whom South Koreans at home had previously envied. Humiliating caricatures of Korean-Americans in South Korea’s TV dramas were the most vivid testimonial to the trend. Finally, the Korean mass media was assertive in undermining the American myth by portraying the United States as a declining hegemony as well as a country of drugs, crime, racial discrimination, and AIDS. America was no longer seen as a symbol of a powerful, abundant, and benevolent patron, but rather a loathsome, ugly, and greedy competitor.14

At present, these diverse perceptions of the United States overlap simultaneously in South Korea. Whereas the older generation and vested interests in South Korea still retain a strong pro-American perception, the younger generation and a growing number of middle- and low-class people show a rather strong anti-American sentiment. Meanwhile, a group of reform-minded intellectuals have been urging Korean people to know more about the United States (知美: jimi) and to utilize it for the sake of national interests (用美: yongmi) by overcoming the emotional dichotomy between anti- and pro-American perception.

**Accounting for Resurgent Anti-American perception**

**Resurgence of anti-American sentiment:** Despite the simultaneous overlap of diverse perceptions of the United States, it is true that over time South Koreans’ perception of the United States has been sliding into an overall negative direction. According to a survey by the United States Information Agency in 1965, 68 percent of 500 Korean respondents answered that the United States was the most preferred country.15 A Donga Ilbo survey conducted in November 1981 showed that 60.6 percent of 1,504 respondents identified the U.S. as the most preferred country, followed by Switzerland (9.4 percent) and Israel (7.7 percent). Meanwhile North Korea was the most disliked country (59.4 percent).16 Since 1984, however, South
Korean perception of the United States has continued to deteriorate. According to a 1984 Joongang Ilbo survey, only 37.3 percent of 1,500 respondents replied that the U.S. was the most preferred country, and the figure declined to 19.5 percent in 1990. In another survey conducted by Gallup Korea on February 26, 2002, only 13.2 percent of 1,032 respondents replied that the U.S. is the most preferred country. A survey conducted by the Samsung Economic Research Institute in January 2003 shows that those with favorable feelings on the United States declined from 36 percent in 2001 to 24.5 percent in 2003, an 11-point drop, while those who have negative feelings rose by almost 20 points from 21.7 percent in 2001 to 41.9 percent in 2003.

South Koreans’ perception of ROK-U.S. relations is not positive either. According to a survey by Donga Ilbo conducted in March 2003, 66 percent of 2,021 respondents said that bilateral relations are not good. A survey by the Joongang Ilbo in mid-December 2002 reveals that 50.9 percent of 1,030 respondents favors a gradual reduction or a withdrawal of American forces in South Korea, while 48 percent favors their continuing presence; 64 percent viewed the existing Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) as being unequal and unfair, calling for an immediate revision. And only 20.4 percent advocated strengthening of the ROK-U.S. alliance, whereas 28.1 percent urged the South Korean government to seek a more autonomous stance; 50.5 percent favored reducing dependence on the U.S. through realignment of the alliance.

A more striking aspect is an increasing generational divide. While the older generation favors the United States, the younger generation shows a tendency to dislike it. According to the same 2002 Gallup Korea survey, half of all those 50 or older revealed that they like the United States, but 70.3 percent of the age group in their twenties and 74 percent in their thirties responded that they dislike the United States. And those in their twenties and thirties turn out to be much more vocal in calling for the reduction or withdrawal of American forces, realigning the alliance, and revision of the SOFA. Another opinion survey conducted on high school and college students reveals a much more shocking result: 41.5 percent of 200 student respondents answered that China was their most preferred country, followed by North Korea (31.5 percent). Only 8.5 percent identified the United States as the most preferred country.

A comparative overview also reveals shocking results. Along with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the ROK-U.S. alliance has been one of the most structured and sustaining alliances in the world. The two countries have also cultivated extensive networks of political, economic, social, and cultural interdependence over the past five decades. Nevertheless, a comparative standing of South Korea’s perception of the United States seems quite dismal. A Pew Research Center’s worldwide survey in 2002 ranked South Korea eighth in terms of unfavorable attitude toward the United States among 44 countries. Only 53 percent of South Korean respondents answered that they have a favorable feeling toward the United States. This figure is the second lowest, only next to Bangladesh (45 percent), among seven Asian countries surveyed (the Philippines 90 percent, Japan 72 percent, Vietnam 71 percent, Indonesia 61 percent, India 54 percent). In addition, various polls began to show that South Koreans prefer China to the United States.

**Accounting for anti-American sentiment:** What factors account for the downward spiral? Causes of anti-Americanism have varied over time, depending on the national mood. As discussed above, during the opening of the Yi dynasty and the Japanese colonial period, anti-American perception was shaped by the interplay of several factors.

First, the China-centered worldview widely held by the elite and masses of the Yi dynasty led them to portray the United States as a Western barbarian people because it was located outside the Chinese cultural sphere. Its tacit alliance with Japan was another factor. The Katsura-Taft Agreement, a lukewarm American attitude during the 1919 Paris Peace
Conference, and the Washington naval conference and recognition of Japanese rule over Korea all bred a feeling of betrayal among Koreans. And in the 1930s the United States was also criticized for its imperial behavior. Socialists’ critique of the United States underscores such attitude. Moreover, racial discrimination and arrogance manifested through the Yellow Peril invoked a hostile attitude toward the United States.

In the postindependence period, anti-American sentiments were cultivated by revisionist historical interpretations. For revisionist intellectuals, the United States was neither a savior of the Korean nation nor a benevolent patron. On the contrary, they argue that the United States was not only responsible for national division but also instrumental in the outbreak of the Korean War through Dean Acheson’s declaration that excluded South Korea from its defense perimeter. Moreover, the United States is also to be blamed for distorting political and economic development by not only patronizing authoritarian regimes but also systematically excluding the popular sector through coercive means. Some scholars even attributed the outbreak of the Korean War to the United States by arguing that it was an extension of the war of national liberation. In the 1980s the Kwangju Uprising, pressures for trade liberalization, and cultural clashes played an equally important role in fostering the anti-American phenomenon.25

These factors still remain as background conditions in shaping contemporary Korean perceptions of the United States. There are additional variables that have factored in the formation of the most recent anti-American phenomenon in South Korea.

First is the growing cognitive incongruence between power and status. Since the 1990s South Koreans, especially youths, tend to believe that South Korea is a powerful country. In their eyes, South Korea is no longer a weak and dependent country. It is the twelfth largest economy in the world. More importantly, South Korea’s entry into the final four of the World Cup of soccer profoundly elevated Korea’s national pride. They want a corresponding recognition of their international status from the United States. Nevertheless, Korean youths perceive that South Korea has not gotten such treatment from the U.S. For them, the SOFA, unfair legal treatment of the tragic death of the two schoolgirls, occasional violation of Koreans’ human rights in the American military base, and political pressures related to South Korea’s acquisition of American military equipment (e.g., F-15) are convincing testimony of the unequal relationship with the United States. American insensitivity to South Korea’s quest for a new status comparable to its power can be seen as one of the critical causal factors of recent anti-American sentiment.

Second, a deteriorating American image can also be attributed to changing domestic and external ambiance. The advent of the post–Cold War era, improved inter-Korean relations, and the erosion of a shared threat perception have lessened the strategic value of the United States for South Koreans, which has in turn precipitated a more independent attitude on the U.S. Demographic changes also matter. A great majority of the South Korean population is under 50, and therefore they do not have a strong memory of Japanese colonial rule, the Korean War, and the overall poverty and underdevelopment that the country went through. Compared with older Koreans, they tend to show a lesser degree of appreciation of America’s contribution to the transformation of contemporary Korea, making it easier for them to harbor anti-American sentiments.

Third, recent anti-American sentiments appear to be related to two changes in South Korea’s domestic politics. One is closely related to the process of democratic consolidation, and the other to a major power shift in Korean politics. Democratic opening and consolidation not only accompanied local autonomy but also proliferated nongovernmental organizations. Along with this, democratic changes have also made the rule of law a major political mandate. American forces in South Korea, who used to enjoy a special status by being exempted from application of South Korean law, have been pressured to comply with South
Korean law. Under this changed domestic political landscape, local governments in American base areas began to champion the interests of local citizens, while NGOs have started anti-American forces campaigns. The frequency of disputes between American forces and NGOs rose rapidly, fueling anti-American sentiments. Disputes over the American firing range in Maehyangri, the dumping of toxic wastes into the Han river, and various crimes committed by American military personnel exemplify this trend.

A power shift has also affected the shaping of anti-American sentiments. The young generation and those who are close to the Roh Moo-hyun government understand that pro-American forces have been dominant in every aspect of Korean society and that the pro-American establishment has monopolized material and positional values in Korean society. For them, an anti-American stance is equivalent to being anti-establishment and believing that it might lead to a more even distribution of material and positional values. Two telling examples can be found in the composition of the presidential staff of Roh Moo-hyun. One is that most of the key presidential staff are “386” generation members, who are in the thirties, were educated in the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s. They have a shared experience in actively participating in the anti-American movements of the 1980s. Another example is that the National Security Council in the office of the president is mostly staffed with those who were trained in South Korea and Europe, whereas American influences are scarcely found. This new breed of young power elite has an inherent tendency to take an anti-American stance, reflecting their own historical memory and perspective.

Fourth, public sentiments are usually driven by interests and events. The same can be said of anti-American sentiments. Whenever there were conflicts of interest between Seoul and Washington, anti-American perception tended to be heightened. For example, American pressures for market opening and the resulting trade conflicts were one of the primary factors behind anti-American sentiments and movements in the latter part of the 1980s. Divergent interests over the issue of how to deal with North Korea served as another driving force for the spread of anti-Americanism. Likewise, interests have played a crucial role in shaping South Korean perception of the United States.

Equally critical were the unintended consequences of events and South Korea’s efforts to find a scapegoat. Every society has the tendency to seek a scapegoat in coping with domestic or external hardship. Such a trend has been most pronounced in South Korea. South Koreans tend to blame others rather than themselves in the face of major incidents. National division, the Korea War, the military coup in 1961, the Kwangju incident, and the International Monetary Fund crisis are all believed to be caused by the United States. The inertia of scapegoating and unfounded conspiracy theories has amplified anti-American sentiments in South Korea, masterminded by progressive intellectuals and NGOs. The role of the Jongyojo (National Teachers’ Union) deserves careful attention in this regard. The Jongyojo is a teachers’ labor union whose members have championed progressive ideas in school teaching. Its members have implanted anti-American sentiments in the minds of Korean youths through their teaching. Mass media is equally to blame. Media sensationalism aggravated the situation out of proportion, undermining the South Korean perception of the United States.

Finally, the lack of knowledge of the United States also matters. South Koreans tend to treat the U.S. as a unitary actor, while ignoring its pluralistic nature. As noted before, America is equated with George W. Bush. Most Koreans fail to see liberal forces in the U.S. who oppose the Bush position. Failure to appreciate the dynamic and pluralistic nature of American politics and society has contributed to the rise and proliferation of ill-informed perceptions in South Korea. What makes the situation worse is the silence of Korean intellectuals who have correct knowledge of the United States. Their opportunistic behavior has compounded the anti-American phenomenon.
September 11, the Bush Doctrine, and Anti-Americanism in South Korea

The foreign policy of the Bush administration post–September 11 served as another important factor in aggravating the image of the United States in South Korea. Most Koreans showed their utmost sympathy for the victims of the September 11 incident and strongly denounced al-Qaeda and terrorists. Nevertheless, they have been critical of the Bush doctrine that emerged out of September 11.

The Bush doctrine is composed of four elements: the primacy of weapons of mass destruction and global terrorism in national security agenda, moral absolutism, hegemonic unilateralism, and offensive realism.27 South Koreans appreciate American concerns on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and global terrorism, but they have been critical of the other three elements.

Moral clarity in the conduct of American foreign policy is understandable, but South Koreans have opposed the way the Bush administration divides the world into good and evil and imposes its values and principles on others unilaterally.28 In fact, erosion of the American image in South Korea can be attributed partly to the Bush administration’s handling of North Korea based on the principle of moral absolutism. For Bush, North Korea under the Kim Jong-il leadership, along with Iraq and Iran, is nothing but a rogue state and an axis of evil, because they brutalize their own people and squander their national resources for the personal gain of the rulers; they display no regard for international law, threaten their neighbors, and callously violate international treaties to which they are party; they are determined to acquire weapons of mass destruction, along with other advanced military technology, to be used as threats or offensively to achieve the aggressive designs of these regimes; they sponsor terrorism around the globe; and they reject basic human values and hate the United States and everything for which it stands.29 Most South Koreans share the above observation with the United States, but they believe that the Bush administration has been misusing moral clarity as a pretext to undertake hard-line actions on North Korea rather than negotiated settlement through dialogue.

Another striking aspect of the Bush doctrine is hegemonic unilateralism, which can be defined as U.S. unilateral efforts to promote American values and interests worldwide through the projection of its hegemonic power.30 New American hegemonic unilateralism is framed around several principles. First is the primacy of American values and interests, such as freedom, peace, and human rights. Second is the unilateral imposition of American leadership through its preponderance of power. Third is a shared understanding among neo-cons that American leadership can prevail over multilateralism. It assumes that if necessary, the United States as a hegemonic leader can override international law, norms, and regimes. Finally, it is also based on the new notion of alliance that divides friends and enemies in a binary manner.31 It has been manifested in several different forms: a veto on the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, the U.S. Senate’s refusal to ratify the establishment of the International Criminal Court, unilateral nullification of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, opposition to U.N. regulations on illicit transactions of small weapons, the indefinite delay of Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and most importantly, the invasion of Iraq without the resolution of the U.N. Security Council.32

Such attitude has become pronounced in its dealing with the North Korean nuclear problem. Since October 2002 North Korea has been calling for a peaceful resolution of its nuclear problem through a bilateral dialogue with the United States. But the Bush administration rejected the offer and unilaterally asked North Korea to dismantle its existing nuclear programs completely, verifiably, and irreversibly.33 Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld made this point very clearly by stating, “We will not bargain or offer inducements
for North Korea to live up to the treaties and agreements it has signed." For hard-liners of the Bush administration, engaging in negotiations with North Korea is seen as an act of appeasement to its blackmail, reminiscent of the Clinton administration. Since North Korea has committed a crime by violating international treaties and agreements, it should correct its bad behavior proactively. Otherwise, North Korea should be subject to harsh punishments. Economic assistance and other forms of positive incentives will be considered only after North Korea gives up its nuclear programs. The staunch unilateral American position of “dismantle first, dialogue later” has further complicated the nuclear standoff with North Korea.

Offensive realism constitutes the final component of the Bush doctrine. It is composed of four interrelated strategic elements. The first element is the principle of preemptive action, which is predicated on the assumption that “we cannot let our enemies strike first” and that “America will act against emerging threats before they are fully formed.” The second element is the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons in the process of undertaking preemptive action. The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which was submitted to Congress in January 2002, has pointed out the increasing value of missile defense and use of tactical nuclear weapons in coping with the new security environment of global terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and suggested to adopt the triad of offensive strike system (both nuclear and nonnuclear), defenses (both active and passive), and a revitalized defense infrastructure. Central to this new strategic concept are offensive deterrence, namely preemption, and tactical use of nuclear weapons. Congressional appropriation of the 2003 Defense Authorization Act that included $15 million for the research and development of RNEP (a robust nuclear earth penetrator) in November 2002 has made it all the more plausible. The third component is the increasing denial of Westphalian sovereignty by arguing that sovereignty of nation-states who commit or sponsor genocide, terrorism, and the spread of weapons of mass destruction should not be respected. The final component is the primacy of military power. In order to carry out preemptive actions effectively, the United States has been increasing military capability in an unprecedented manner.

It is this component of offensive realism that has aroused the anti-American ambiance in South Korea. The possibility of a U.S. preemptive attack on North Korea, the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons, and a likely denial of North Korea’s sovereignty have heightened the fear of conflict escalation on the Korean Peninsula, which in turn contributed to shaping a warmonger image of the United States. It is in this context that South Korean youths began to consider the United States as a major obstacle to peace-making in Korea.

There is ample empirical evidence to show South Koreans’ dislike of the Bush doctrine. For example, a survey by a Korean weekly magazine, the Sisa Journal, in March 2002 reveals that 71.4 percent of respondents opposed the global escalation of American anti-terror war efforts. The same survey also shows that respondents identified Bush’s remarks on North Korea as part of an axis of evil and the American invasion of Afghanistan as the second and the third most important factors responsible for the deterioration of the American image in South Korea. The Pew survey cited above also shows that 73 percent of South Korean respondents was critical of American unilateralism and its war on terrorism. The figure is quite high when compared with 32 percent in Japan. South Koreans’ support of American war efforts in Iraq can be seen as an indicator of their endorsement of the Bush doctrine. According to a survey conducted by the Hangyoreh Daily on September 22, 2003, 57.5 percent of 1,000 respondents opposed the dispatch of additional troops to Iraq, which the U.S. requested, while only 38.2 percent supported the request; 51 percent said that they would support the dispatch if the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution on the formation of multinational troops. Why then have South Koreans opposed the dispatch?
While 47.9 percent cited potential casualties of South Korean troops, 36.4 percent opposed the dispatch because the Iraqi war is an unjust invasion by the United States.44

All in all, South Koreans have sympathized with the September 11 tragedy and denounced global terrorists, but they appear to disapprove of the nature of the Bush doctrine as a strategy to cope with new security concerns. Obviously, the blind pursuit of moral absolutism, hegemonic unilateralism, and offensive realism have tarnished the American image in South Korea, precipitating anti-American sentiments.

Conclusion: What Should Be Done?

South Korean perceptions of the United States are not fixed, but fluctuating and diverse. They show a wide spectrum ranging from yonmi to hyommi. Thus, banmi cannot be seen as the dominant national phenomenon in South Korea. In most cases, banmi and chinmi coexist, producing ambivalent personal and national psyches. Nevertheless, anti-American sentiments have been on the rise. Younger Korean perception of the United States seems particularly troublesome, clouding the future of the ROK-U.S. relationship. What should be done? There are no easy solutions, but we can think about some concrete steps.

First, we need to start with the humble assumption that we cannot get rid of anti-American sentiment, since it is an inseparable part of Koreans’ personal and national psyche. We should live with it. The more we try to remove it artificially, the more enduring it might become. But we can minimize it, while maximizing pro-American or the “know-America” attitude. In other words, we should not be oversensitive to the anti-American sentiment. We should consider it a normal process in a country that is going through great social, political, and ideological transformation.

Second, we should avoid politicizing the anti-American phenomenon. As can be seen in a recent negative entanglement of “abandon the U.S.” and “abandon South Korea” campaigns, the sensationalized politicization of anti-American sentiments in South Korea and the U.S. is bound to result in a negative sum outcome, undermining mutual interests. In this regard, the role of the mass media in both countries seems critical. Sensationalized anti-American moves by the Korean mass media have worsened rather than ameliorated the situation.

Third, more efforts need to be rendered in order to enhance intersubjective understanding. South Koreans should neither simplify nor distort the United States. They should enhance knowledge of America and Americans in a more objective manner. Studying in the United States does not warrant expertise on American studies. More systematic efforts to understand America are needed. In this regard, American studies should be encouraged. Most universities and colleges in South Korea have research institutes on Japanese, Chinese, and Russian studies, but very few have research institutes solely devoted to American studies. Systematic promotion of American studies would not only facilitate the dissemination of objective knowledge on the United States but also prevent purposeful distortion of the United States by anti-American forces.

Fourth, given the asymmetry of power and attention, it might be inconceivable for the United States to render similar efforts in understanding South Korea. Nevertheless, the United States can be more prudent in dealing with South Korea. It should avoid leaving South Koreans with an impression of its unilateralism by engaging in more consultation and consensus-building with South Korea in managing alliance affairs. Its sensitivity to Korean culture and people seems essential in order to improve Korean perceptions of the United States.

Fifth, despite the 100-year history of ROK-U.S. relations, a few powerful elite have monopolized the channels of communication and interaction between the two. More
diversified channels and networks of communication should be institutionalized and
developed, ranging from the power elite and opinion leaders to civic groups. In particular,
bilateral networks among civic groups in the two countries are of critical importance. Likewise, a more systematic and institutionalized approach to bilateral understanding and cooperation between the ROK and the U.S. will greatly improve Korean perception of the United States.

Finally, South Koreans have been increasingly critical of American foreign policy. Though sympathetic with American concerns over the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and global terrorism, they do not support the moral absolutism, hegemonic unilateralism, and offensive realism embodied in the Bush doctrine. South Koreans are especially sensitive to the possible application of the doctrine to North Korea by the U.S., which was partly responsible for the rise of anti-American sentiments. Thus, it seems essential for the United States to undertake a more prudent foreign policy and to seek a multilateral consensus and cooperation rather than a unilateral one in order to change its image in South Korea.

Notes
22. Hon-ok Park, “Chungsonymonui Banmi Gamjung-Siltaewa Daechaek” (Anti-American Sentiments of Korean


42. The Pew Research Center, op. cit.


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