



SAIS U.S.-KOREA
YEARBOOK 2008

JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY

The Lee Myung-bak Revolution: Explaining Continuity and Change in South Korea's Foreign Policy



By Alisher Khamidov

I. INTRODUCTION

Since coming into power in February 2008, ROK President Lee Myung-bak has ushered in dramatic changes to South Korea's foreign policy. In a major break from his predecessors, Lee adopted an aggressive policy toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) that linked economic assistance to the DPRK's abandonment of its nuclear weapons program, a break that has eroded many achievements of the decade-long Sunshine Policy. Yet, Lee also demonstrated a degree of continuity with two of his predecessors, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, on other foreign policy issues. Most notably, Lee showed steadfast support for the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, known as the KORUS FTA, which was negotiated by previous administrations, and continued with only modest modification, the transformation of the U.S.-ROK alliance to a security alliance.

In short, President Lee has demonstrated divergent responses to his predecessors' policies on these key foreign policy issues: a radical departure on North Korea, a modest modification in U.S.-ROK alliance transformation, and little change at all regarding the KORUS FTA. How does one account for this variation? This question becomes particularly puzzling in light of the great anticipation that Lee

would bring about radical changes - in all areas - having won the presidency on a platform of change amid widespread discontent with former president Roh Moo-hyun's performance. Added to this conundrum is that his party, the conservative Grand National Party, won an absolute majority in the Parliament as well, providing legislative support for his policies. Why then did President Lee, after having swept both the presidential and general elections, depart from his predecessor on some policies but not others?

This paper addresses this puzzle by closely examining politics within the government, between political parties, and in the context of society at large. It argues that the inconsistencies in Lee's foreign policy directions can be better understood by dispelling the myth of a bipolar political inclination in South Korea, as well as by examining the institutional constraints of Korea's political structure as a whole.

Lee's victory is often linked to the demise of progressive forces and the rise of the conservative camp in South Korean politics. Contrary to such views, this paper argues that Lee and his team represent a new political force in ROK politics: although they share some of the ideological views of the conservative camp, they do not fully belong to it, nor do they represent the values of the progressive camp. Rather, the president and his team can be categorized as adherents of a pragmatist camp; the defining feature of which is that their domestic and foreign policy goals are guided more by pragmatic considerations of state interests rather than the ideological preferences or emotions that have characterized progressives and conservatives in the past.

This paper argues that the 2007 presidential election presented a unique opportunity for the pragmatist camp: the South Korean public was weary of the corruption and economic problems associated with the decade-long rule of progressives; while also unwilling to embrace all that conservatives stood for. Lee and his team then formulated a platform of economic change and pragmatic foreign policy, especially toward North Korea, that appealed not only to voters across the two camps, but also to different layers of South Korean society that customarily did not associate themselves with right-wing or left-wing political groups.

Pragmatists also benefited from South Korea's constitutional design which endows the executive with broad powers to implement foreign policy. Although granting the president this mandate, the constitution also limits him to a single five-year term, providing the incumbent with little incentive to keep high political approval ratings usually necessary to secure reelection. As such, this paper argues that once Lee and his team of pragmatists secured victory, they were insulated from growing criticisms, shifts in public opinion, and declining approval ratings because this term limit prevented the need to heed pressures commonly associated with reelection.

II. THE PROGRESSIVES, THE CONSERVATIVES, AND THE PRAGMATISTS

Observers of South Korean politics have long distinguished between two main political camps that dominate South Korean politics: progressives and conservatives. The progressive camp has been closely associated with support for the Sunshine Policy toward North Korea and for a foreign policy independent from the United States. Meanwhile, adherents of the conservative camp have generally been known for their steadfast support of the security alliance with the United States and their antagonism toward North Korea.

While these characterizations may hold some relevance when applied to the elite level, studies conducted at the grassroots level have established that political polarization among South Korean residents is not very significant and that the distinction of South Koreans as progressives or conservatives is often misleading. In an article entitled, "Conservatives and Progressives in South Korea," which was published by *Washington Quarterly* in fall 2008, Haesook Chae and Steven Kim argued that "South Koreans are not as ideologically driven as currently assumed, but are broadly governed by a pragmatic and realistic appraisal of South Korea's position in world affairs. There is a remarkable degree of coherence and consensus on the pressing foreign policy issues of the day."

Contrary to popular opinion, the research by Chae and Kim also demonstrates that both the progressives and conservatives are driven by pragmatic and centrist considerations when it comes to foreign policy issues. For example, the

progressives' support for North Korea is not unconditional. Many progressives recognize the threat posed by the DPRK's nuclear program. They are also critical of human rights violations by Pyongyang. Although progressives view the United States with a degree of suspicion, they recognize the importance of the U.S.-South Korea security alliance.

At the elite level, the dichotomous depiction of the South Korean polity into right-wing (conservatives) and left-wing (progressives) has often eclipsed the existence of a separate political force - the pragmatist camp. The defining feature of pragmatists is that they place pragmatism and rational choice above ideological and emotional considerations in promoting the ROK's state interests. Pragmatists operate with business-like minds and strategies. For them, any investment, be it in an enterprise or a relationship, must bring dividends, and the costs involved must not outweigh the benefits. In keeping with this thinking, if the ROK invests a lot of resources in a relationship with another country, the relationship must be beneficial to the ROK.

Many observers have linked Lee with the conservative camp, citing his criticism of the Sunshine Policy and his steadfast support for the security alliance with the United States. However, Lee and his team of close aides have repeatedly announced that they consider themselves as pragmatists. Among key figures within this camp who have exerted and continue to exert considerable influence on Lee are Kim Tae-hyo, presidential adviser for external strategy, Hyun In-taek, former professor at Korea University, and Yoo Jong-ha, former foreign minister. Hyun In-taek and Yoo Jong-ha led the team of researchers that crafted the tenets of the "MB (Myung-bak) Doctrine."

Pragmatists share some goals and views with the conservative camp. For example, pragmatists, like conservatives, have distaste for what they see as flaws in the Sunshine Policy. Under the auspices of the Sunshine Policy, the administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun provided almost \$3 billion in economic and humanitarian assistance to the DPRK. In extending this massive assistance, these administrations were allegedly trying to "appease" the DPRK government by refraining from criticism of North Korea's flagrant violations of human rights and the continuation of its nuclear program. From a pragmatist's perspective, South Korea gave a lot to the North and received very little in return. Despite numerous

overtures by the South, North Korea continued to test nuclear weapons, balked at returning South Korean abductees, and maintained a belligerent rhetoric that exacerbated the security situation on the Korean peninsula.

Unlike the conservative camp, pragmatists have a more nuanced approach of dealing with North Korea. They are not against the Sunshine Policy *per se*. They are against the lack of reciprocity that characterizes the tenets of this diplomacy. President Lee repeatedly stated his support for engagement with North Korea. As such, the MB Doctrine provides for massive economic and humanitarian aid as long as Pyongyang reciprocates Seoul's steps, denuclearizes, and opens itself up to the outside. Lee outlines his vision for economic and humanitarian assistance to the DPRK in his development plan entitled, "Denuclearization and Opening 3000." In this plan, South Korea pledges to help the DPRK raise its GDP per capita to \$3,000 within ten years in exchange for North Korea's willingness to give up its nuclear program and to open the country to South Korean businesses.

Pragmatists place special importance on the ROK's military and economic partnership with the United States because this relationship is highly beneficial for promoting the ROK's national interests. They usually cite three main reasons. First, the alliance with the United States is paramount for the ROK's military security. South Korea is located in a region that is marked by increased security risks and uncertainty. The steady growth of China and its military might, the DPRK's nuclear testing, and territorial disputes with Japan all present serious security ramifications and necessitate closer relations between the United States and South Korea. Second, the economic partnership with the United States, the largest and most important economic actor in the global arena, is important for the ROK's economic development. And third, pragmatists believe that policy coordination with Washington is necessary to ensure the success of South Korea's North Korea policy by preventing the DPRK from playing the United States against South Korea in efforts to gain political and economic dividends.

By the beginning of 2008, members of the pragmatist camp found themselves at a critical juncture. Due to a configuration of political developments, pragmatic political views and economic plans appealed to many South Koreans who had yearned for political and economic change. After several decades of steady economic growth, South Koreans faced a different reality: their national currency

was in a slump, their stock markets had been devalued, and their private debt was soaring. The *chaebols*, once the country's engines of economic growth, fell down, creating a mass of unemployed citizens.

Many South Koreans have come to equate the period of rule by Lee's predecessors, Presidents Roh Moon-hyun and Kim Dae-jung, with corruption, government ineffectiveness, incoherent foreign policy, and deep economic and social problems. By the time Roh Moo-hyun's presidential term was up, his approval ratings had dropped to 10 percent. This trend sent a clear message to all political forces in South Korea about the public's fatigue with the status quo and its yearning for dramatic changes.

The controversial legacies of the two presidents weakened progressive forces before the December 2007 presidential elections. Members of Roh's Uri Party struggled to distance themselves from Roh by branching off and creating the United New Democratic Party (UNDP). They also sought to join forces as evidenced by the merger between the UNDP and the Creative Korea Party. Nevertheless, these efforts did not help the progressives to reverse the political tide against them.

Lee's decisive victory in the December elections demonstrated the rise in influence of pragmatic-thinking politicians. This trend played a powerful role in the formulation of Lee's foreign policy. In pursuit of his agenda, Lee also benefited from the peculiarities of South Korea's institutional design.

III. THE EFFECT OF INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN ON SOUTH KOREA'S FOREIGN POLICY

Students of political science continue to debate the benefits and detriments of various political systems that can be found in different parts of the world. Some argue that political systems that favor strong presidential power are important for the political and economic development of a state. Others claim that parliamentary democracy is the best form of government. Regardless of the sides that scholars take, these debates attest to the fact that a state's institutional design - the division of formal powers and configuration of government institutions - has a profound

effect on its policy formation.

Insights from the institutional design theory are relevant to the study of South Korean politics. In keeping with the constitution of the Sixth Republic, the National Assembly is endowed with the power to approve foreign policy goals. However, the president and the State Council determine and implement the ROK's foreign policy objectives.

The president has the power not only to determine the foreign policy objectives; he/she also chooses agents of policy implementation. As the commander-in-chief and the head of the state, the president appoints the prime minister and the members of the cabinet, including the foreign minister, the minister of unification, the defense minister, and the head of the National Security Council. The president also appoints the ROK ambassadors to other countries. Article 60 of the constitution gives the president the authority to conclude agreements with other countries, declare war, deploy ROK troops overseas, and allow the deployment of troops of other countries on ROK territory after receiving the approval of the parliament. The Foreign Affairs Committee within the National Assembly works with the office of the president in coordinating foreign policy processes.

The current institutional arrangement has allowed the National Assembly, political parties, and civil society organizations to play an important role in domestic affairs. For example, the parliament exercises its power by approving the government's economic and social programs. Political parties and civil society groups have a say in important political debates on economic and social issues. However, all of these actors take a "back seat" when it comes to foreign policy, letting the president occupy the "driver's seat."

While endowing the office of the president with broad powers, the constitution limits a president to a single five-year term. Under the constitution, the president is exempt from criminal liability while in office, and the only crimes that can bring the president down are insurrection or treason. An important implication arising from this arrangement is that the incumbent has few incentives to keep the high political approval ratings that are generally needed to secure reelection. Once a president secures an electoral victory, he is practically free to pursue whichever policy course he considers fit, regardless of what his campaign platform may have

been or whether or not it is in line with public opinion. The public may be outraged by the president's policy and stage mass protests. However, little can be done to reverse the policy unless the president decides to do so.

This institutional arrangement in South Korea - a strong, but term-limited presidential system - provides ample explanation for Lee's ability to bring about the dramatic transformation of the ROK's policy toward the DPRK and the United States. This paper now turns to the discussion of how Lee has gone about achieving this "revolution."

IV. POLICY TOWARD THE DPRK: REPLACING THE SUNSHINE POLICY WITH SUNSHINE PRAGMATISM

Since taking office, Lee and his team have pursued a determined policy of pragmatism toward the North. Among the first policy decisions made by the president was a reorganization of the decision-making process, granting the dominant role in foreign policy formation and implementation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. President Lee also formed a new entity called the Council on the Coordination of Diplomacy and Security Policy. The council, which consists of key ministers, meets on a weekly basis and decides major policy issues.

The Ministry of Unification (MOU) played a far more important role under the previous two administrations, but has since seen its fortunes dwindle under the Lee administration. The Lee administration cut the number of MOU workers from 290 to 210. Additionally, the number of teams that worked on various unification-related projects was cut from 40 to 24. On numerous occasions, MOU representatives were simply excluded from key decision-making processes. Before Lee assumed office in February 2008, his advisers discussed the possibility of abolishing the ministry altogether or merging it with the Foreign Ministry. Although this did not occur, the MOU's mandate under the Lee administration was reduced to promoting awareness and education about the unification.

Concurrently with changes in decision-making processes, Lee embarked on a divisive foreign policy course toward the DPRK. Soon after assuming office, Lee urged the DPRK to abandon its nuclear weapons program in exchange for peace

and closer economic cooperation. President Lee claimed in a March 2008 press conference in Seoul, “North Korea’s leadership has to realize that the settlement of its nuclear problem would be truly helpful to inter-Korean economic cooperation and unification. The North will only be able to stabilize its regime, maintain peace and achieve economic prosperity when it gives up its nuclear program.” The president also set forth ROK demands for the DPRK to return South Korean prisoners of war who had been kept in the North since the Korean War.

The DPRK’s reaction to Lee’s demands was highly negative. The North Korean leadership viewed Lee’s policies, including “Vision 3000,” as interventionist and highly threatening to their regime’s viability. To undermine the Lee administration’s efforts, the DPRK pursued a two-pronged approach: a policy of escalating tension in an effort to increase domestic pressure on the Lee administration; and a policy of rapprochement with the United States to significantly weaken the ROK’s position.

As per the first policy, the DPRK initially leveraged public accusations against Lee and his administration for their failure to implement the June 15 Joint Declaration and the October 4 Declaration, which committed South Korea to providing economic and humanitarian aid to the North. The state-run media in the North also depicted Lee as a traitor and his administration as a “fascist dictatorship” and a “racketeer” operation. In April 2008, DPRK authorities evicted one South Korean official from DPRK territory, and barred entry to two others. The North Korean leadership also accused South Korea of posing a direct military threat. On April 3, 2008, DPRK officials demanded apologies for a statement made by Kim Tae-young, the South Korean chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. North Korean authorities interpreted the statement as having suggested a preemptive strike against nuclear sites in the North by the South.

However, the pressure exerted by the DPRK did not yield significant changes in the Lee administration’s approach. Addressing the DPRK’s vitriolic diatribe, Lee repeatedly claimed in his appearances before media that North Korea must abandon its outdated practice of fanning a rift among South Koreans and become more cooperative. Lee also argued that North Korea should show signs of a change in its attitude before the ROK would begin with the implementation of the June 15 and October 4 declarations.

Diplomatic ties sustained further strain in July 2008 after North Korean soldiers shot to death a South Korean tourist at Mount Kungang. Seoul responded to the incident by halting the Kungang tours and requesting that South Korean officials be allowed to participate in the investigation of the incident. The North refused to do so.

In November, North Korea escalated the rift by announcing the planned suspension of tourist travel to Kaesong City and the expulsion of hundreds of South Koreans - workers at the Kaesong Industrial Complex. The DPRK laid direct blame for the worsening relations on Lee's administration.

The deepening rift between the ROK and the DPRK galvanized various political movements in South Korea. Opposition political parties, civil society groups, human rights organizations, and mass-media outlets representing both progressives and conservatives accused the Lee administration of misguided policy toward the North. In a prominent example, former president Kim Dae-jung lambasted Lee's North policy, suggesting that it would be disastrous for stability on the Korean peninsula. In November 2008, prominent Lee critics such as Pak Nak-chung of the All-Korean Committee for Implementation of the June 15 Joint Declaration and Venerable Young-dam, chief director of the Buddhist Broadcasting System condemned Lee's policy of ignoring North Korea.

Despite the growing domestic criticism of his North Korea policy, Lee remained adamant. In his December 2008 address to the National Unification Advisory Council, Lee gave no indication of change in his Vision 3000 doctrine. Lee argued that it is "better to move towards true reconciliation and unification by getting off to the right start, even if that is difficult at first, than to arrive at a bad outcome for having been unexacting about the North-South relationship." Lee also suggested that "waiting is also a policy."

V. KORUS FTA AND SECURITY ALLIANCE: AN OLD FRIEND IS BETTER THAN A HUNDRED NEW ONES

President Lee's ability to pursue his policy objectives with little regard to political or public opposition was demonstrated not only in his North Korean policy, but

was also visible in his approach to the United States. After taking office, President Lee began implementing his pre-election promise of deepening security ties with the United States. Signifying a markedly pro-U.S. foreign policy, Lee's first official overseas visit was in April 2008 to the United States. In Washington, D.C., Lee's primary objective was to secure U.S. support for the ROK's new tough approach toward North Korea.

Although President Bush offered a warm welcome to Lee, U.S.-ROK relations were marked by a number of controversies. The first controversy surfaced during Lee's visit to the United States. The change in the Bush administration's policy toward direct engagement with the DPRK created an awkward moment in U.S.-ROK relations. Bush's change of heart regarding North Korea threatened the successful implementation of President Lee's initiatives toward the North. It also deepened concerns in South Korea that more direct engagement between the United States and North Korea would sideline the South and weaken its weight in regional politics.

Another controversy appeared in October 2008 when the Bush administration decided to remove the DPRK from the list of terror sponsoring states in an effort to save a disarmament accord with North Korea before the expiration of Bush's term in office. Following this move, there was a sense of betrayal in Seoul because U.S. officials had not taken ROK concerns into consideration, and had only informed South Korean diplomats just moments before announcing the decision. This move strengthened the mood among ROK policymakers that the United States was primarily driven by its own national interests, even at the expense of its allies' national interests.

The third controversy was over the KORUS FTA. In keeping with his markedly pro-U.S. leaning, Lee emerged as a steadfast supporter of the KORUS FTA. Despite the fact that the KORUS FTA had been a product of negotiations with Lee's predecessors, Lee and his team of pragmatists viewed the KORUS FTA as economically beneficial for South Korea in the long run. However, in the meantime, the mood in the United States had changed, and U.S. support for the KORUS FTA had weakened. At the time Lee became president, it was uncertain whether the U.S. Congress would approve the KORUS FTA.

Lee's determined support for the KORUS FTA came under fire in the spring of 2008, when thousands of South Korean citizens took to the streets protesting the Lee administration's lifting of the 2003 U.S. beef import ban. What became known as "candlelight vigil" protests brought together Lee's political opponents from several different camps; leftist labor parties, civil society organizations, and farmers' associations all joined the protests in an effort to blunt Lee's authority and embarrass him personally. The protests turned violent after youngsters clashed with riot police.

Rather than changing his position on the KORUS FTA, Lee seized on the violent clashes as a pretext to restrict assemblies and demonstrations. His administration also sought to impose controls on mass-media outlets by appointing Lee supporters to key managerial positions in powerful television networks such as SKY LIFE, YTN, and KBS.

Lee's willingness to push through the KORUS FTA amidst growing political opposition was demonstrated in January 2009. The Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Assembly, dominated by the ruling Grand National Party, submitted the KORUS FTA to a subcommittee for deliberation in spite of determined, and even violent, opposition from the rivaling Democratic Party. This move by Foreign Affairs Committee members was widely seen as directed from the Blue House. In a confrontational move, Chung Sye-kyun, chairman of the Democratic Party, accused President Lee of trying to turn the parliament into his puppet.

These recent developments help illustrate how, given the lack of institutional checks and balances on executive power, the Lee administration was free to push his agenda despite political or popular opinion. Some observers even go so far as to allege that Lee's policies are increasingly sliding into "authoritarian rule." Growing public disapproval, as demonstrated by protests and marches, seems to have had little deterrent effect on this team of assertive nationalists as they continue to pursue a highly divisive policy agenda.

VI. THE SECURITY ALLIANCE WITH THE UNITED STATES

Throughout 2008, President Lee repeatedly stated that security cooperation was the cornerstone of the ROK-US alliance. Lee's steadfast efforts to deepen the security alliance with the United States reflect new challenges for ROK security. Security risks and uncertainty have increased on the Korean peninsula in the past decade. In the North, the steady economic expansion of China has translated into the rise of her military might. DPRK rhetoric has become aggressive, while nuclear testing has not abated. To the east, a territorial dispute with Japan over Dokdo (or Takeshima to the Japanese) has presented serious security ramifications. To hedge all these security challenges, closer relations between the United States and the ROK has become more and more of a necessity.

A strengthened U.S.-ROK security alliance was important to the Lee administration for other pragmatic reasons as well. For instance, security collaboration with the United States, the largest and most important economic actor in the global arena, serves to increase the ROK's international influence; and, closer alliance and policy coordination with Washington was imperative for Lee to ensure the success of ROK's North Korea policy by preventing the DPRK from playing the United States against the ROK in efforts to gain political and economic dividends.

The year 2008 saw numerous signs of improving U.S.-ROK security ties. After a series of negotiations, the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) agreed to raise its share of the costs for maintaining over 28,000 U.S. troops by 2.5 percent to reflect inflation. This increased the ROK's total contribution to United States Forces Korea (USFK) upkeep to 43.5 percent.

In another significant move, in October 2008, the U.S. Senate passed legislation that granted the ROK the most preferential treatment in government-to-government sales of U.S. weapons systems. The move symbolized U.S. willingness to further cement bilateral military relations with South Korea and came after the House of Representatives had already enacted legislation in September that granted South Korea the foreign military sales (FMS) status enjoyed by NATO members. South Korea responded to this by buying 250,000 tons of U.S. munitions.

In late October 2008, ROK Defense Minister, Lee Sang-hee, visited Washington, D.C., to meet his counterpart, U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates. During a press conference that followed their meeting, Secretary Gates told Lee that the United States remained committed to defending South Korea and that its armed forces would come to South Korea's rescue in case of military emergency. Gates also stated that the "U.S. nuclear umbrella," as a part of the ROK-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty, would cover South Korea.

VII. CONCLUSION

A Japanese proverb states that a "reputation of a thousand years may be determined by the conduct of one hour." South Korea's decade-long foreign policy and political landscape changed dramatically in 2008 with the arrival of President Lee. Lee reversed the Sunshine Policy toward the North, pushed hard for ratification of the KORUS FTA, and made modest changes to the development course of the U.S.-ROK security alliance. This paper argues that this divergence in Lee's foreign policies - some keeping with past administrations and some veering away - can be understood by examining the changes in political power that corresponded with altered perceptions of the ROK's foreign policy priorities. Lee and his team came to power with distaste for the failures of the Sunshine Policy. Nevertheless, from the pragmatic point of view, they saw the KORUS FTA and the security alliance with the United States as beneficial to the ROK's interests, and chose to demonstrate some level of continuity on these issues with administrations of the past. The pragmatists benefited from the institutional design of the ROK political system, which is overwhelmingly slanted in favor of presidential power.

Lee's predecessors were engaged in decade-long and painstaking efforts to cultivate warmer relations with the DPRK, restraining their criticism of human rights violations and turning a blind eye to Pyongyang's uncooperative mode of operation. Unlike his predecessors, President Lee embarked on a foreign policy path marked by pragmatism and rational considerations of the ROK's national interests. His open criticism of the DPRK and his bold economic assistance program which threatens the vitality of the Kim Jong-il regime, has translated into enmity in DPRK-ROK relations and growing domestic criticism as well.

Despite the DPRK's calculated efforts to escalate the rift and the growing domestic opposition to his policies, President Lee has demonstrated no sign of changing his North Korea policy. In fact, Lee's administration appeared in 2008 to be prepared for the worst case scenario, that is, one that includes the shutdown of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and a complete diplomatic rupture in North-South relations.

Despite the Lee administration's strong belief in the veracity of its foreign policy, three particular issues may emerge as significant challenges. First, the course that U.S. President Barack Obama should decide to take toward U.S.-DPRK relations will ultimately have a poignant effect on DPRK-ROK relations. President Lee and his team members are genuinely concerned that U.S.-DPRK rapprochement is likely to undermine their pragmatic approach toward the DPRK. Second, the MB Doctrine toward North Korea was designed as a long-term process. To truly achieve success, the doctrine would require more than a decade. Given that Lee is limited to a single five-year term, the question that lingers is whether Lee has enough time and resources to accomplish his foreign policy goals.

The third serious challenge that the Lee administration faces is the uncertainty regarding the economic collaboration with the United States. Although the ROK is prepared to pass the KORUS FTA, there seems to be no indication that the U.S. Congress will reciprocate the move. President Obama already demonstrated his opposition to FTA treaties during his election campaign. It is apparent that the optimistic hopes that Obama's election rhetoric might not necessarily translate into policy are unwarranted. The unwillingness of the Obama administration to support KORUS FTA may turn out to be a serious embarrassment that could erode the Lee administration's pragmatic foreign policy course.

CHRONOLOGY

- December 2007* Lee Myung-bak secures victory in the ROK presidential election. Lee unveils his MB Doctrine.
- February 2008* Lee Myung-bak assumes office as the tenth President of South Korea.
- March* Lee urges North Korea to completely abandon its nuclear

weapons program to pave the way for inter-Korean peace and closer economic cooperation.

April

Presidents Bush and Lee discuss U.S.-Korea relations and the KORUS FTA at Camp David.

Lee proposes the establishment of high-level diplomatic channels between the DPRK and the ROK and the opening of liaison offices in the capitals.

The DPRK accuses Seoul of not fulfilling its obligations under the six-party declarations. The DRPK also seeks apologies for statements that presumably carried the threat of preemptive strikes. Pyongyang also singles out President Lee for criticism.

May

South Korea relaxes its stance on providing aid to the DPRK. The Ministry of Unification offers 50,000 tons of corn to Pyongyang.

May-June

100,000 Koreans participate in candlelight vigils in protest against beef imports and Lee's support of the KORUS FTA. Lee's approval ratings fall to 10 percent.

June-July

The DPRK limits entry to North Korea for South Korean officials.

July

Diplomatic ties sustain further strain from the July 11 shooting of a South Korean tourist at Mount Geumgang by North Korean soldiers.

November

Calls for Lee to change his North Korea policy intensify in the ROK.

December

The DPRK announces the shutdown of tours to Kaesong City and limits the number of South Korean employees allowed to work in the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

President Lee announces that there will be no change in policy toward North Korea.