



Policy Forum 04-03A: Don't Misunderstand Firing of South Korean Foreign Minister

February 5, 2004 Brent Choi



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by Brent Choi

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Essay by Brent Choi](#)

[III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses](#)

I. Introduction

In this brief essay, Brent Choi, North Korea specialist for the JoongAng Daily, argues that the recent dismissal of South Korean Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Yoon Young-kwan has been grossly misinterpreted by the U.S. media as an outgrowth of the struggle between pro-U.S. and anti-U.S. factions within the Roh administration. Instead, Yoon's dismissal must be interpreted through the socio-cultural prism of South Korea's bureaucratic society.

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II. Essay by Brent Choi

"Don't Misunderstand Firing of South Korean Foreign Minister"

By Brent Choi

South Korea's recent dismissal of its Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Yoon Young-kwan seems to have captured more than enough attention of the U.S. media. The New York Times pointed out as a victory of the South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, LA Times warned the replacement of Yoon could cost the U.S.-South Korea ties and the Wall Street Journal warned that Washington wouldn't just sit by if the ripples spread any further.

Forgive me for my rude remarks but as a reporter in Seoul - familiar as I am with all kinds of weird foreign articles on Korea - I have never seen anything so completely misinterpreted than the lately featured articles of NYT, WSJ and LAT. The Foreign Minister in Korea got sacked and that as far as those articles got it right. As for what to make of it, the incident should be closely viewed through the socio-cultural prism of Korea's own bureaucratic society.

Now let's see what really happened back in the Foreign Ministry. It started with Cho Hyun-dong, a director in the North American Affairs bureau under Yoon making an extremely offensive remark against the incumbent president Roh. "Once President Roh and his Our Open Party fail in the April General Election the president could revert back to just taking care of two ministries (Ministry of the Science and Technology and the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries)." President Roh enraged at such remarks (and more) went to confirm the rumor and in the process, the media caught on. The president expected Yoon to reprimand the official in question but he did no such thing thus, leading the Blue House to take the matter into its own hand and discharge Yoon instead. The president and the National Security Council deemed it a necessity as a way to uphold the general discipline in the officialdom. The fact that the official who made a personal misstatement also happened to be in charge of U.S.-South Korea relations had nothing to do with actual relations of the two nations.

Nevertheless when the media in general started reporting the whole situation as a conflict between "independent diplomacy" versus "pro-U.S. diplomacy" that seems to have also surprised the Blue House as well. The last thing the Blue House wanted was for the U.S. to view the whole event as another one of President Roh's efforts to step up the anti-U.S. policy. This is probably the reason how Ban Ki-moon, a career diplomat and a well-versed U.S. expert got appointed a new Foreign Affairs Minister.

In a way, it is true that the ongoing conflict between the Foreign Ministry and the National Security Council may have played a part in blowing the whole incident out of proportion. There are several reasons for conflict between the two sides. Aside from difference of policy concerning North Korea and the United States the officials of the two sides were also sharply divided by other personal matters like academic background, age, ranking and others. Also bear in mind the Blue House and the Foreign Ministry not only failed to communicate properly but also failed in reaching a consensus for a common goal and strategy. Not that I blame the Foreign Ministry - it's been nearly a year since the Roh administration took off and yet we still have hard time pinning down exactly where the Roh administration is headed to when it comes to North Korea and other foreign policy. Unlike the previous "well prepared" president Kim Dae-jung, the president we have now seems to be "unprepared" and "ambiguous."

The New York Times may see President Roh as a winner, but if anything, he's the loser of the latest jumble. The event could be compared to a match between Mike Tyson and a five-year-old child. Tyson would win of course, but he'd also be utterly humiliated for actually striking a child. That's how other diplomats as well as some 700,000 middle class bureaucrats in South Korea would regard the president from now on; either with chilly distance or with mockery.

The one who comes somewhat closer to the winner's description is Lee Jong-seok vice secretary of the National Security Council. Lee, as a North Korea expert became Mr. Roh's favorite "brain" after going through tough times of his own last year. But the recent scandal will also prove to be a burden to him in the long run now that he is likely to be the next target whenever the opposing officials get disgruntled by president's policy. Up until now the criticism toward government policy went to President Roh, the Blue House Secretariat or National Security Council. Not any more. Now the opposing parties learnt that the best way to criticize President Roh's next diplomatic and security-related policy is by concentrating their attack on Lee.

Historically South Korea's presidents could be classified largely into two types; one with vision and logic and the other with sensibility and irrationality. Snygman Rhee, Park Chung-hee and Kim Dae-jung were the ones with logic, Roh Tae-woo and Kim Young-sam with the sensibility to warm up to the public. However it was usually the presidents of the former category that delivered actual results. Those in latter category left nothing more than a lingering impression. I fear the present president belongs to the second category, tsk, tsk.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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[Return to top](#)

[back to top](#)

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