

Policy Forum 08-064: President Lee Myongbak's Learning Curve

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By Mikyoung Kim

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I. Introduction

Mikyoung Kim, Assistant Professor at Hiroshima City University - Hiroshima Peace Institute, writes, "Mr. Lee leaves an impression that he rushed to declare himself different from his predecessor by ingratiating himself to our allies, and selling out Korea in the process. It is dangerous to reveal all your cards at once, given the precarious nature of international collaboration."

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II. Article by Mikyoung Kim

- "President Lee Myongbak's Learning Curve"

By Mikyoung Kim

I almost flew to Korea to cast my supporting vote for Mr. Lee Myongbak during the last presidential election. His entrepreneurial pragmatism seemed to offer the best remedy for the nation's divisive political quagmire.

Mr. Lee's commanding lead in pre-election polls persuaded me not to catch the flight to Seoul; I quietly celebrated his victory from afar. Like most Koreans, I was awaiting a fresh breeze of common sense to reshuffle the ideological apparatus of the past decade.

Japanese TV programs lionized Mr. Lee, portraying his triumph as a watershed in contemporary Korean history. His storybook life - rising from dire childhood poverty, forging an impressive record at the helm of Korea's front-running company and then reinvigorating the capital city as mayor of Seoul - produced awe and admiration. This "sarariman shinwa" (Mr. Lee's legendary rise from the rank of salaried employee) struck a cord with many Japanese because it was so unlikely - especially for this island nation.

Some of Japan's most influential politicians have inherited their power bases through family ties. The political hereditary class includes the familiar names like Mr. Yasuo Fukuda, Mr. Taro Aso and Mr. Shinzo Abe. Many Japanese were expecting Mr. Lee's forceful leadership in Seoul to positively transform Korea-Japan relations.

Yet within a few months of his inauguration, violent protests in Korea against imported American beef have been followed by heated controversies over Japanese history textbooks laying claim to the Dok-do Islets. Now Japan is buzzing with the U.S. government's flip-flop categorizations of the Islets from "unclaimed disputed rocks" to "South Korean sovereignty." Why such a drastic downturn in political fortunes for the South Korean president, and the evaporation of bilateral goodwill, in such a short period of time?

An answer lies in Mr. Lee's political naiveté. His unsolicited pre-inaugural remarks on the "history problem," indicating willingness to bury the past for the sake of better Korea-Japan relations, were a major diplomatic error. Although revisiting the unfortunate past out of isolationistic chauvinism is never constructive, a nation seated at the negotiation table must sometimes press its advantage by drawing on the entangled past. Why preempt use of the diplomatic stage to Korea's own disadvantage? This folly is compounded when dealing with a partner which rarely hides its territorial ambition.

Koreans often mistake Japan as a "small country." We often repeat what the Japanese say about themselves without investigating the hard facts. The length of the main Japanese archipelago is about three times the length of South Korea, and Japan's population is double that of the southern Korean peninsula. When asked why they consider their country small, Japanese make it clear that their reference points are North America, Europe and China - not Korea.

Japan also remains locked in territorial disputes with neighbors such as Russia over the Kuril Islands and China over the East China Sea. Tokyo's claim to the Dok-do Islets is one point on this continuum

of on-going conflicts. Toyotomi Hedeyoshi's ambition to conquer China via the Korean peninsula in the 16th century and Imperial Japan's colonial conquest in Asia at the turn of the 20th century are the telling precedents of what we are witnessing now.

Mr. Lee's alleged plea to Mr. Fukuda at the Toyako Summit not to raise the Islet issue in history textbook was the sad mark of political novice. He should have taken a stern position regarding our territory and boldly planted Korea's diplomatic flag. Mr. Lee needs to more thoroughly study his job descriptions as the head of the state.

After reviewing his dealings with the U.S. and Japan these past months, Mr. Lee must realize that his role is to promote and protect Korea's national interests - not to score popularity points with Mr. Bush and Mr. Fukuda. Relations among nations are contextual and change depending on the specific issue at hand; there is no clear distinction between an enemy and an ally in international affairs. His job is to cultivate strategic ties with allies in order to secure our interests, while actively engaging in persuasive communications with his real constituents: the Korean people.

Mr. Lee leaves an impression that he rushed to declare himself different from his predecessor by ingratiating himself to our allies, and selling out Korea in the process. It is dangerous to reveal all your cards at once, given the precarious nature of international collaboration. Unfortunately, that is exactly what Mr. Lee has done.

Yet it is premature to write off the administration without giving it sufficient time to prove itself. Mr. Lee has four more years in office and may still become a quick study as the national leader. Since the Korean people tend to judge and punish authority in a rash manner, we also need to learn to patience.

Let's wait and see if the administration can correct its policies by learning from recent rookie mistakes.

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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Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:
nautilus@nautilus.org