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South Korea as a Beacon of Asian Democracy

Hong-koo Lee

Former Prime Minister of the Republic of Korea

Recent discussions on the Korean Peninsula have been dominated by security issues due to the rising nuclear and missile threats from North Korea. However, it remains equally important not to overlook South Korea and the way, despite its belligerent neighbor, the nation continues to act as a beacon of hope for democracy in Asia.

In determining the origins of South Korean democracy, significant attention should first be paid to understanding South Korea's unique geographical setup. Bordering North Korea, which itself shares boundaries with China and Russia, and a short distance from Japan, South Korea is located within close proximity to a group of nations that appear almost overwhelmingly larger and more powerful. In light of this seemingly unfavorable geographical arrangement, an important question arises: how does South Korea remain an independent entity among these great powers?

To answer this question, we shall dive briefly into South Korea's recent history. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Korea, like many other Asian nations, was exposed to imperialism. However, unlike most of the others, Korea was subject almost entirely to an imperialism of non-Western origins. One of the most decisive moments in Korea's recent history was when Japan, an Asian power, annexed Korea as an imperial colony in 1910 after its victories in both the

Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars.

Another important factor in South Korea's geopolitical situation has been the increasingly close relationship between South Korea and the United States. At this point in time, it would not be an understatement to call the United States and South Korea neighbors in both the metaphorical and literal sense. The US has, in fact, become quite used to its status as a Pacific power. The US's increasing emphasis on its Pacific endeavors can be seen not only in the context of its international relations, but also domestically, as can be seen from the movement of famous East Coast baseball teams to the West Coast, California's rapid economic growth, and the statehood status obtained by Hawaii and Alaska during the twentieth century. The US's inextricable link to the Pacific was cemented for good, however, with its participation in World War II and the Korean War five years later.

Under this geopolitical system in the Pacific, it has been difficult for countries to maintain independence, but even more difficult to maintain well-functioning democracy. This is particularly true for South Korea. While Asian nations often remember the early to mid-twentieth century as an age of imperialism, many European nations remember this period as the birth of totalitarianism. Asians, including South Koreans, it seems, are less sensitive to the dangers of totalitarianism than their Western

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counterparts. During the early and mid-twentieth century, Asian countries focused more on fighting against colonialism and driving economic development rather than enforcing human rights and promoting democratic values.

The birth of a democracy-centered outlook in South Korea can be traced back to the anti-Japanese, pro-independence movements of the early twentieth century. Rather than calling for a return to the previous dynastic order, these movements advocated the formation of a democratic republic. In order to decide what sort of republic to create, many advocated American or European-style democracy, including Syngman Rhee, who, with his academic and professional interest in American-style democracy in many ways, epitomized Korean support for democracy.

Occurring alongside these pro liberal-democratic independence movements, however, the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia caused many Koreans to become ardent supporters of communist ideals. Some Koreans were impressed with Lenin’s success in Russia and speculated that the best way to regain independence for the country and build a new country was to follow the path of Lenin. The then-undivided Korea’s border with Russia made it very easy for Korean communists to travel to the Russian side and join Lenin’s movement. The close proximity of Korea to Russia allowed for the rapid growth of communist support in Korea.

Thus, a few short decades after the Bolshevik Revolution, the conflicting nature of these ideologies solidified into a physical boundary with the creation of the two Koreas after World War II. With the election supervised by the US, the Republic of Korea was created as a democratic republic in 1948.

North Korea immediately followed by forming a government under the leadership of Kim Il-sung and his communist party. Today, almost eighty years later, the situation remains roughly the same—an indefinite armistice, one of the longest artificial divisions of a country in the world.

Since the division of the two Koreas, the past eighty years can be viewed primarily as a success story that resulted in the birth of a uniquely Korean form of patient democracy. From its inception, South Korea always desired to be an active participant in the international community, and a democratic one at that. On the other hand, North Korea sought to be an exception. In contrast to the recent success of the South in achieving political internationalism and a strong market economy, North Korea has continued to bolster ideas of its exceptionalism using remnants of twentieth century-style totalitarianism, posing severe problems not only for South Korea but for the world. Opposition to the antithetical North Korean system has always been and will continue to be one of the main challenges South Korean democracy faces.

It is true that despite current appearances, the past eighty years in South Korea have at times been anything but peaceful. Nevertheless, South Korea’s relentless emphasis on the power of constitutionalism has time and time again guided the country through times of crisis, especially the recent controversy surrounding the Park presidency. For the several months since the last fall, the international community witnessed massive candlelight demonstrations across South Korea demanding the impeachment of then President Park Geun-hye, and not a drop of blood was spilt. This was only possible because there was strong consensus among

people that the best way to solve problems is to follow the constitutional procedure. Despite disagreements on many sides, the Korean people deferred to and respected the decisions made by the Constitutional Court.

South Korea has come a long way. Through our experiences, we have shown that patience, in combination with unequivocal trust in Korea's constitutional system and close links to the international community, has become a defining characteristic of South Korean democracy. The case of South Korean democracy has demonstrated that in solving any challenge, one needs to maintain rule and order and follow constitutionalism. With this, we in Asia can, in our lifetime, make our region one of the best places to live as well as a model for successful democracy. ■

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— *Hong-koo Lee* was the Prime Minister of South Korea (1994-1995) under former President Kim Young-sam. Before that, he served twice as the Deputy Prime Minister for Unification. He was also a member of the Korean National Assembly and the chairman of then-ruling New Korea Party. He was the Korean ambassador to the United Kingdom (1991-1993) and the United States (1998-2000). He is currently Chairman of the Board at the Seoul Forum for International Affairs, and founded the East Asia Institute. He also sits on the Board of the Asia Foundation and the Salzburg Seminar, and serves as a member of the executive committee of the Club de Madrid. Dr. Lee received his Ph.D. in political science at Yale University.