



Atlantic Council PRESENTS:

A NEXT GENERATION PERSPECTIVE ON THE FUTURE OF THE KOREA-US RELATIONSHIP





Atlantic Council

**BRENT SCOWCROFT CENTER
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

THANK YOU TO THE KOREA FOUNDATION FOR THE GENERAL SUPPORT, ALLOWING THE AUTHOR TO TRAVEL TO KOREA TWICE FOR LEARNING AND RESEARCH. A SPECIAL THANKS TO TROY STANGARONE AT THE KOREA ECONOMIC INSTITUTE FOR HELPING TO GUIDE THE PROJECT AND HIS MENTOR SHIP THROUGHOUT.

ALSO, TO JOE OLLMAN FOR GOING ON THIS JOURNEY AND TRYING SOMETHING NEW WITH US. AND OF COURSE, THE ATLANTIC COUNCIL TEAM THAT MAKES THIS ALL POSSIBLE, ESPECIALLY HUIHUI OOI, DIYA LI, AND MIYEON OH.

ISBN: 978-1-61977-407-0

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JULY 2017



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THERE'S A BELIEF THAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE APATHETIC ABOUT THE FUTURE, ESPECIALLY AS IT RELATES TO POLITICS.



THIS SEEMS SOMEWHAT TRUE ABOUT MILLENIALS - BOTH IN THE UNITED STATES AND SOUTH KOREA.



I HAVE FOUND, HOWEVER, THAT THIS APATHY DOESN'T STOP BOTH YOUNG AMERICANS AND SOUTH KOREANS FROM HAVING OPINIONS ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEIR TWO COUNTRIES.



I SPENT TIME IN 2016 AND 2017 INTERVIEWING YOUNG PROFESSIONALS IN AMERICA AND THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA (ROK) ABOUT THEIR THOUGHTS ON US-ROK RELATIONS.



THESE YOUNG PROFESSIONALS MIGHT JUST HAVE THE FUTURE OF THE GLOBAL ORDER IN THEIR HANDS FOR A SIMPLE REASON:



THEY WILL VOTE IN THE COMING DECADES.



THIS MATTERS TREMENDOUSLY BECAUSE HOW AMERICANS AND KOREANS VOTE IN YEARS TO COME MATTERS FOR THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL ORDER.





THEREFORE, WHEN THESE YOUNG PROFESSIONALS HEAD TO THE BALLOT BOX NOW AND IN THE FUTURE, THEY WILL BE CHOOSING BETWEEN LEADERS WHO HAVE DIFFERING OPINIONS ABOUT RELATIONS WITH CHINA AND THE U.S.



WHICH COUNTRY SOUTH KOREA OPTS TO ALIGN ITSELF WITH WILL BE AN INDICATION ABOUT WHICH COUNTRY SOUTH KOREA FINDS TO BE THE STRONGEST AND MOST LIKELY LEADER OF THE NEW GLOBAL ORDER.



THEREFORE, SOUTH KOREA WILL BE THE GLOBAL ORDER'S BELLWETHER. IN ESSENCE, WHERE KOREA CHOOSES TO GO, SO WILL WORLD ORDER.



IN MY CONVERSATIONS WITH THESE YOUNG PROFESSIONALS WE DISCUSSED THE MAIN THEMES ABOUT US-ROK RELATIONS, INCLUDING QUESTIONS SUCH AS:



IN 20 YEARS, WILL KOREA CHOOSE TO WORK MORE CLOSELY WITH CHINA OR THE UNITED STATES?



WOULD A UNITED KOREAN PENINSULA NEED THE UNITED STATES?



DOES KOREA NEED THE US MORE THAN THE US NEEDS KOREA?



WHY SHOULD THE UNITED STATES CARE ABOUT KOREA?



AND MANY MORE...



MY CONVERSATIONS WERE WITH YOUNG PROFESSIONALS OF MANY BACKGROUNDS. SOME INCLUDED GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS IN BOTH COUNTRIES BUT ALSO HAIRDRESSERS, JOURNALISTS, TECHNOLOGISTS, ECONOMISTS, AND MORE.



SOME WERE WELL EDUCATED, SOME WERE NOT. I AM UNDER NO ILLUSION THAT THIS IS A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE, BUT MY CONVERSATIONS PROVIDE SOME CONTEXT TO THE CURRENT DEBATE...



...BREWING AMONG YOUNG AMERICANS AND KOREANS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE US-ROK RELATIONSHIP, AND, IN ESSENCE, THE FUTURE OF THE GLOBAL ORDER.



THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT

IT'S NOT WORTH SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME ON THE CURRENT CONTEXT FOR TWO REASONS: IT IS CONSTANTLY CHANGING, AND WHAT THE YOUNG PEOPLE IN AMERICA AND SOUTH KOREA HAD TO SAY IS FAR MORE INTERESTING.



...THERE ARE A FEW IMPORTANT THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND.



FIRST, THE UNITED STATES AND SOUTH KOREA HAVE BEEN STAUNCH ALLIES SINCE THE KOREAN WAR IN 1950-1953.



WASHINGTON PROVIDES SEOUL WITH SECURITY AND ECONOMIC BACKING, AND SEOUL PROVIDES WASHINGTON WITH A NORTHEAST ASIAN ALLY, A PLACE TO STATION ITS TROOPS, AND ACCESS TO A CAPITALIST MARKET.



BOTH GOVERNMENTS USUALLY AGREE, WITH NATURAL EBB AND FLOW, THAT IT IS IN THEIR BEST INTERESTS TO KEEP THE RELATIONSHIP GOING.



BUT, BOTH COUNTRIES ARE DEMOCRACIES, AND THE PEOPLE THAT ULTIMATELY DECIDE THE RELATIONSHIP'S FUTURE ARE THE PEOPLE WHO WILL VOTE FOR YEARS TO COME: YOUNG AMERICANS AND KOREANS.



SECOND, NORTH KOREA'S INCREASED AGGRESSIVENESS PUT THE RELATIONSHIP BACK ON THE MAP. NORTH KOREA HAS BEEN TESTING MISSILES AT AN INCREASED CLIP IN RECENT YEARS WITH THE AIM BEING A NUCLEAR WARHEAD ON AN INTERCONTINENTAL BALLISTIC MISSILE THAT CAN REACH THE UNITED STATES.



PYONGYANG ALREADY HAS AN ABILITY TO HARM U.S. REGIONAL ALLIES LIKE SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN WITH SHORTER-RANGE PROJECTILES, BUT THE TRUE VICTORY FOR KIM JONG-UN'S NORTH KOREA WOULD BE THE OPTION TO STRIKE AMERICAN TERRITORY.



NORTH KOREA'S BELLIGERENCE PLAYED A PROMINENT ROLE IN SOUTH KOREA'S LATEST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION. LIBERAL POLITICIAN MOONJAE-IN CAME OUT VICTORIOUS AFTER THE PREVIOUS PRESIDENT, PARK GEUN-HYE, WAS IMPEACHED.



MOON ADVOCATES FOR A MORE CONCILIATORY STANCE TOWARD NORTH KOREA IN DIRECT CONTRAST TO US PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP'S MORE HARDLINE APPROACH.



THIS MAY PUT A WEDGE BETWEEN THE TWO ADMINISTRATIONS IN HOW THEY APPROACH THE NORTH KOREAN PROBLEM. HOWEVER, BOTH SIDES HAVE THE SAME GOAL IN MIND: AN END TO THE NORTH KOREAN THREAT.



YOUNG KOREANS AND AMERICANS — WHETHER AT THE BALLOT BOX, GOVERNMENTAL SERVICE, OR ELSE WHERE — WILL PLAY A ROLE IN DEFINING WHETHER OR NOT THAT THREAT SUBSIDES.



WHAT KOREANS SAID

I TRAVELED TO SOUTH KOREA IN THE SUMMER OF 2016 TO INTERVIEW YOUNG KOREANS FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE: HAIRDRESSERS, GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, STUDENTS, AND MORE.



IN GENERAL, NONE OF THEM SHOWED ANY DISDAIN TOWARD THE UNITED STATES. THEY WERE PROUD OF THEIR COUNTRY'S AFFILIATION WITH AMERICA AND THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE US-ROK TIES PLAYED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOUTH KOREA.



BUT, THEY ALL WERE LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE, AND WHAT THEY SAW WAS AN AMERICA THAT COULD NOT COMPETE WITH CHINA'S INTEREST IN SOUTH KOREA AND ITS REGIONAL STAYING POWER—THAT IS, CHINA IS IN THE REGION WHILE THE UNITED STATES IS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE PACIFIC OCEAN.



IN THE END, THE GENERAL TAKEAWAY WAS THAT SOUTH KOREA SHOULD MAINTAIN STRONG TIES TO THE UNITED STATES.



BUT THAT CHINA WAS GOING TO BE THE MOST IMPORTANT COUNTRY IN SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE.



THE UNITED STATES WON'T BE COMMITTING ITSELF TO ASIA.

SAID A STUDENT IN SEOUL.



IT WAS IN THE MIDST OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, AND THIS STUDENT SAW THE KINDS OF COMMENTS MADE BY THEN-CANDIDATE DONALD TRUMP.

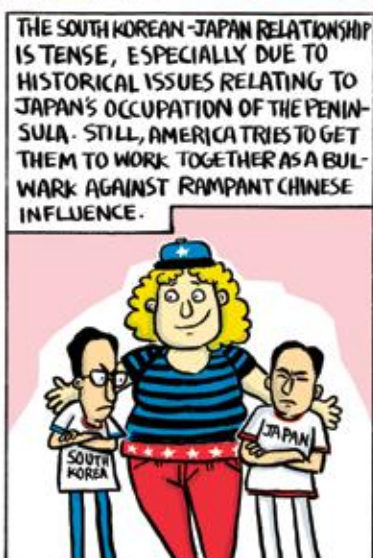
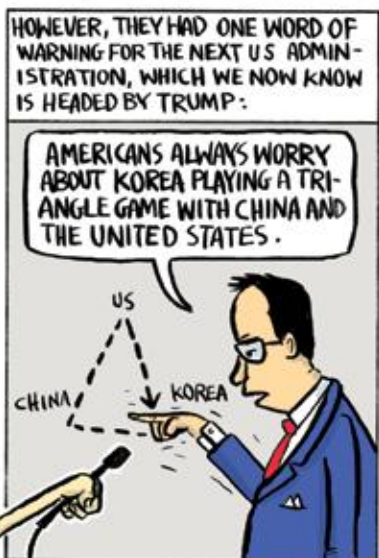
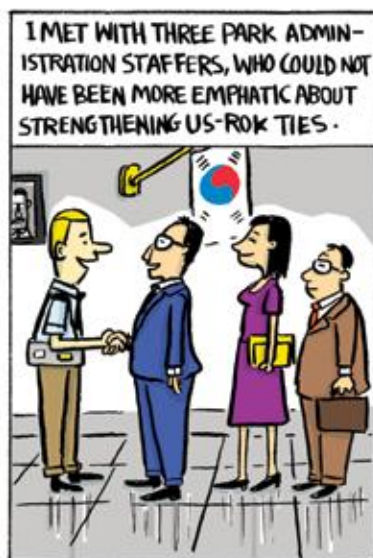


YET, HE CLAIMED THE "TRUMP PHENOMENON" WAS NOT NEW AND THAT AMERICA HAD PROVEN TIME AND AGAIN THAT IT HAD AN ISOLATIONIST STREAK. INSTEAD, WHAT WORRIES HIM IS THAT...













A POLLSTER SAID:

KOREA GETS SO MUCH MORE FROM THE UNITED STATES THAN WHAT THE UNITED STATES GETS IN RETURN, SO KOREA HAS NO CHOICE BUT TO MAKE THE US KOREA'S TOP ALLY AND PARTNER.



KOREA GETS TO SPEND LESS ON DEFENSE WHILE ALSO GETTING ECONOMIC HELP. IT'S A DEAL THEY CAN'T PASS UP.



"CHINA MIGHT HAVE THE UPPER HAND ON THE ECONOMIC SIDE, BUT KOREA IS UTTERLY DEPENDENT UPON US SECURITY SUPPORT."



AMERICA COULD DO MORE TO MAKE IT SHOW THAT IT CARES ABOUT KOREA THOUGH.



ONE WAY TO DO THAT WOULD BE TO SPEND AS MUCH TIME WITH KOREA AS IT DOES WITH JAPAN, WHICH HE BELIEVES THE UNITED STATES TREATS AS ITS TOP ALLY IN ASIA.



HE ALSO MENTIONED THAT POLLING HAS SHOWN YOUNG KOREANS STILL LIKE THE UNITED STATES AND DISTRUST CHINA.



THAT HAS THE POSSIBILITY TO CHANGE, THOUGH, IF SOUTH KOREA'S ECONOMY DOESN'T PICK UP AND DEAL WITH YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE LACK OF MOBILITY.



CHINA COULD STEP OVER THE LINE IN ITS DEALINGS WITH KOREA, CHANGING YOUNG KOREANS' MINDS.



BUT DESPITE THE WORKFORCE ISSUES, YOUNG KOREANS FEEL THEY STARTED LIFE BETTER OFF THAN THEIR PARENTS, AND YOUNG KOREANS OFTEN ATTRIBUTE THAT TO THE UNITED STATES.



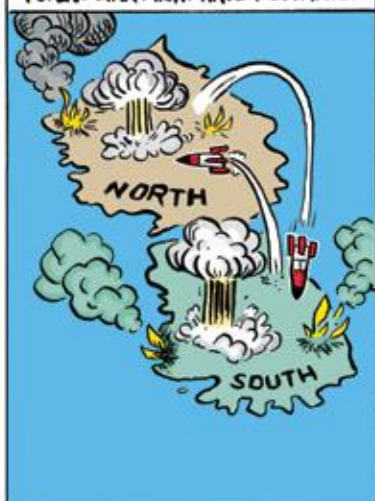
A FORMER STATE DEPARTMENT STAFFER PUT THIS ISSUE MORE STARKLY:



HE REFERRED TO NORTH KOREA'S THREATS TOWARD SOUTH KOREA. HE BELIEVES THE ONLY REASON NORTH KOREA HASN'T USED ITS MASSIVE ARTILLERY FORCE ON THE DE-MILITARIZED ZONE TO HARM SOUTH KOREA YET IS BECAUSE OF US SECURITY BACKING.



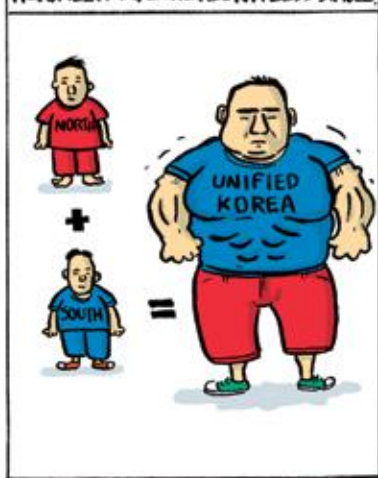
WITHOUT IT, HE CLAIMED, THE KOREAN WAR MIGHT HAVE RESTARTED.



HE ALSO SUGGESTED THAT THE INSISTENCE ON UNIFICATION IS ACTUALLY AGAINST AMERICA'S TOP INTEREST, WHICH IS STABILITY ON THE PENINSULA.



TRYING TO UNIFY THE COUNTRY AFTER SO MANY YEARS WOULD ACTUALLY MAKE THE REGION LESS STABLE.



THE STATUS QUO, WITH A FEW MODIFICATIONS, WOULD BE THE BEST COURSE OF ACTION.



THE ONLY WAY TO STAY ON THAT PATH WOULD BE FOR SEOUL TO COZY UP MORE TO WASHINGTON THAN BEIJING.



A FORMER WHITE HOUSE STAFFER AGREED WITH THOSE SENTIMENTS, BUT PERHAPS NOT AS GLUMLY.





I ASKED HER IF THE UNITED STATES SHOULD PRIORITIZE THAT RELATIONSHIP OVER THE JAPANESE ONE.



I'M IN FAVOR OF WHATEVER KEEPS CHINA AWAY.



CONCLUSION

LET'S BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT THESE INTERVIEWS WERE AND WERE NOT ABOUT.



THEY WERE AN INSIGHT INTO THE MINDS OF THE PEOPLE WHO, AT THE BALLOT BOX AND ELSEWHERE, WILL HELP DEFINE THE FUTURE OF THE US-ROK RELATIONSHIP.



IT WAS ALSO A GOOD SNAPSHOT OF THE CURRENT THINKING ON BOTH SIDES OF THE PACIFIC DURING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN BOTH COUNTRIES.



HOWEVER, THIS WAS NOT AN EXHAUSTIVE STUDY BY ANY MEANS, AND IT WAS CERTAINLY A VERY SMALL SAMPLE.



THAT DOESN'T MAKE IT ANY LESS IMPORTANT. THESE ARE THE DEBATES AND DISCUSSIONS HAPPENING RIGHT NOW IN THE HALLS OF POWER, IN SALONS, AND IN LIVING ROOMS IN SOUTH KOREA AND THE UNITED STATES.



THESE DEBATES WILL SET THE COURSE OF THE US-ROK RELATIONSHIP AND, THEREFORE, WORLD ORDER. THAT IS WHY THESE CONVERSATIONS NEED TO CONTINUE. THE WORLD'S FUTURE DEPENDS ON IT...



THE END



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