South Korea speaks for itself

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A traditional Korean saying has it that when whales do battle, shrimp get hurt. While the saying no doubt holds true, Koreans no longer identify themselves with the proverbial shrimp.

By Koen De Ceuster

The end of the Cold War has led to a shift in the East Asian balance of power. On the Korean peninsula, alliances based on economic benefit are replacing ideological alliances dating back to the Korean War. South Korea has benefited most from this process: the country's economic prowess and President Roh Tae Woo's pragmatic 'Nord Politik' charmed the Soviet-Union and the Peoples Republic of China into establishing diplomatic relations and relaxing their unconditional support for North Korea. That the North was plummeting economically did not help its international appeal.

Though the end of the Cold War provided new opportunities, South Korean self-assertion since the late 1980s cannot be understood apart from the drastic changes that have swept South Korean society. Pride in the booming economy and peaceful democratisation led to a sea change in the self-perception of South Koreans.

Between a rock and a hard place

Surrounded by Russia, China and Japan, Korea's rulers have long realized the need for self-strengthening and have gambled on playing one giant off against the other. Following the demise of the kingdom's self-imposed isolation at the end of the nineteenth century, inept reform initiatives created a power vacuum on the Korea Peninsula; an international struggle for supremacy ensued. The Sino-Japanese (1894-95) and Russo-Japanese Wars (1904), backed by skilful diplomatic manoeuvring rendered Japan's colonization of Korea internationally uncontested. For thirty-five years Koreans suffered but failed to come up with a credible challenge to colonial rule; liberation was only granted when Japan capitulated. While Korean desire for independence was firm, it was short-circuited by post war Allied strategy.

Divided into two occupation zones, opposing political systems were established under American and Soviet patronage. The ideological divide crystallized when two separate states were founded in 1948. The Korean War merely confirmed the division; with only an armistice agreement in place, the war is technically not over. Given the international involvement in the Korean War, a peace treaty will formally require the endorsement of the powers, once again qualifying Korean agency.

National self-depreciation and international patronage

Following Japanese capitulation and intense political battle, Syngman Rhee emerged victorious in the South, Kim Il Sung in the North. Though both leaders and the states they founded claim their roots in the national resistance movement, Syngman Rhee belongs to a lineage of moderate 'Christian self-reconstruction' nationalists (Wells 1990). Convinced that the loss of independence was in large part the result of Korean weakness, many of Syngman Rhee's followers had accepted the inevitability of colonization and pursued public careers under Japanese rule. Re-instated after liberation, they became South Korea's social elite. Despite the nationalist bombast of Rhee and his successors, the conviction that the country was weak, threatened, and in need of a foreign protector pervaded the South Korean elite. As a shrimp among Cold War whales, South Korea turned to the US as its benefactor and protector.

The main threat to South Korea came from the North, which lost no time in rebuilding its war-ravaged infrastructure. Unlike the South, where American aid was diverted into political slush funds, the North's centrally planned economy effectively funnelled the financial support it received into kick-starting the economy. The atmosphere in the South was gloomy; given the North's more radical roots – armed resistance against Japanese imperialism – reticence was absent. Instead, a strong sense of historical legitimacy and pride in what can be achieved alone, the essence of the North Korean *juch'e* ideology, gave rise to unflinching self-confidence.

The roaring nineties

Such was the situation in the sixties, but history has since turned the tables. While the North still clings to its *juch'e* ideology amidst a crumbling economy, the South has powered ahead, forcing its way into the ranks of the OECD. Economic development has allowed the South to become militarily less dependent on the US, reducing its sense of vulnerability. Even more important than economic success was change in the political landscape: by the mid 1980s society had grown exasperated with authoritarianism and demanded democratic reform. In the summer of 1987, the state gave in to mounting public pressure by acceding to free, direct presidential elections.

ANP/AFP file

The movement to impeach President Roh Moo-hyun

In retrospect, this largely cosmetic concession proved the start of a decade of deepening democratisation. Through successive parliamentary and presidential elections, entrenched elites were pushed aside and the organs of state made more accountable. While backroom dealings, corruption, and political bickering did little for public trust, support for democratic institutions remained strong. This was apparent when the opposition-dominated National Assembly tried, on questionable grounds, to impeach President Roh Moo Hyun in March 2004. Dubbed a 'parliamentary coup d'état', citizens took to the streets against the vengefulness of old-style politicians in defence of their president and their hard-won democracy. The 15 April parliamentary elections, in the midst of the impeachment imbroglio, saw remarkable voter turnout following years of declining participation. The party supporting the president won a landslide victory, securing Roh Moo Hyun a majority in the National Assembly to pursue his reform policies.

The mobilization of citizens behind their embattled president testifies to the new vibrancy of civil society. If democracy has deepened in South Korea, it is thanks to civil society groups who have, together with a much freer press, forced accountability on politicians. This has in turn led to a remarkable redefinition of South Korea's international position. The new assertiveness is in part due to generational change among politicians and the electorate. The so-called 386-generation, Koreans in their thirties, born in the sixties, and fighting for democracy on university campuses in the 80s are at the political forefront today. Their primary concern is neither the Korean War nor the communist threat, but the legacies of the authoritarian state. Their struggle has also been a social struggle against government-business collusion in favour of the large conglomerates (*chaeb_l*). Both are seen as self-serving elites: speaking for the nation, with only their own interests in mind.

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Courtesy of 1morefilm: www.1morefilm.com

***Noord Korea: een dag uit het leven* A film by Pieter Fleury**

Towering pride

Following decades of submissiveness, a towering pride over their hard won democracy and economic prowess has taken over Koreans; government and civil society alike now reach out to the region and the world.

The presidency of Kim Dae Jung (1998-2003) proved a turning point in Korea's international positioning. Convinced of the sterility of the confrontational strategy towards North Korea, Kim opted for the 'Sunshine Policy' of cooperation and engagement. Its most palpable success to date has been the June 2000 Pyongyang summit meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. Particularly noteworthy was the fact that Kim Dae Jung actively canvassed foreign support for his policies; China became an important regional partner for South Korea, both economically and diplomatically. South Korean diplomacy has become ever more apparent since the Bush administration entered the White House. Confronted with American obstruction to his Sunshine Policy, Kim intensified efforts toward regional cooperation to increase the pressure on Washington. This has lead to a de facto realignment of forces, with the US increasingly isolated in its stance towards North Korea.

Kim Dae Jung's far-sighted diplomacy was also apparent in his dealings with Japan, where he sought to address lingering grudges over Japan's political inability to atone for its colonial wrongdoings. He made a landmark visit to Japan in August 1998, and came away with a remarkably upfront apology from the Japanese government. Much to the dismay of anti-Japanese diehards, he opened Korean markets to Japanese cultural products. The message was clear: Seoul would no longer play the anti-Japanese card when it served domestic mobilisation. While anti-Japanese sentiment still flares up, it is no longer fomented by the government, but by groups in civil society.

That South Korea speaks with its own voice has become evident under Roh Moo Hyun's presidency. Roh made it clear from the start that he wanted American-Korean relations to change, for Korea to be treated as an equal partner. In the ongoing six-party talks over North Korea's nuclear program, Seoul has been a key player advocating flexibility to Washington. In order to assure leverage, and to acquiesce any American misgivings, Roh committed troops to the US-led coalition in Iraq. Whether the full contingent of 3,600 troops will be sent remains to be seen; the new parliament may be unwilling to commit troops so long as the UN is sidelined.

South Korea's foremost foreign policy concern remains North Korea. Over the past two decades, the threat assessment of North Korea has shifted from a narrow military concern to a more comprehensive political appraisal. With a new generation of politicians at the helm, and after five years of 'sunshine' engagement on various fronts, ideological confrontation has become secondary to the acknowledgement of national unity. Realization that relations with the North cannot improve in isolation, but must take place in a regional context, has pushed Seoul onto the world stage, a role commensurate with its new economic and political clout.

South Korea is proving that a shrewd shrimp can move among the whales. <

Reference

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