



IVAN ALLEN COLLEGE
THE SAM NUNN SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY, TECHNOLOGY, AND POLICY

Between Voters and Allies: South Korea's Foreign Policy Dilemma in a World of Uncertainties

Thursday, September 27, 2007

At Georgia Tech's Wardlaw Center on September 27, 2007, **Dr. Taehyun Kim**, professor at the Graduate School of International Studies at Chung-Ang University in Seoul, South Korea and currently a visiting professor at the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs at Georgia Tech, presented his research on South Korea's foreign policy, elections, and democracy leading up to the ROK presidential elections on December 19, 2007. Dr. Kim, who also serves as the director of the Center for Foreign Policy and National Security of the East Asia Institute in South Korea, has been a visiting scholar at the Mershon Center for International Security at The Ohio State University and has published multiple articles on international relations and South Korean foreign policy in various South Korean newspapers.

For over three years, Dr. Kim has been working on a model to help explain the foreign policy challenges South Korea faces in the run-up to the December 19, 2007 presidential elections, as it deals with the electoral process, foreign policy issues, and the domestic political environment. To put his argument in the proper context, Dr. Kim highlighted several foreign policy issues that South Korea has recently faced:

- President Roh Moo Hyun's 2002 presidential win and the effect that this has had on South Korea's foreign policy.
- South Korea's commitment of 3000 troops to Iraq – the third largest contingency of troops sent to Iraq.
- President Roh's visit to the U.S. in 2004 and the meeting with President Bush where Roh told Bush that he understood U.S. hesitancy concerning Kim Jong Il, but that Roh believed Kim would never use his nuclear weapons arsenal in an offensive manner.
- A trip by Roh the following month to visit ROK troops in Iraq, which caused a boost in popularity for Roh.
- The Afghan hostage crisis of 2007 which resulted in the kidnappings of 23 ROK citizens and the deaths of two of the hostages.

Dr. Kim argued that the current domestic political movement in South Korea - a push toward greater say for ROK citizens in South Korean politics and greater freedom of expression - began to take significant shape in 1987 as South Korean citizens protested for the right to decide the ROK presidency by popular vote. The election process was changed that year and ROK President Roh Tae Woo became the first South Korean president elected by popular vote, as well as the first civilian president of the ROK.

Dr. Kim then proceeded to examine the progression of South Korean politics - leading to the upcoming presidential elections - by examining the advancement of democracy in South Korea over the past 20 years and the institutions that make up the ROK government structure.

President Roh has implemented a “participatory government,” which means that non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) have the opportunity to participate and exert influence in South Korean politics. Dr. Kim mentioned Pyontaek were the USFK is relocating its main military base. In 2006, NGO-driven demonstrations in Pyongtaek became violent. Unfortunately, Dr. Kim noted, such violence tends to be common in South Korea.

Dr. Kim also noted the tough competition between the mass media outlets in South Korea. These outlets are in competition for market shares which makes them more sensationalistic on both social and political issues. Sensationalistic journalism, together with the increasing influence of the evolving ROK public opinion and the advancement of democratic institutions in South Korea, has led to the rise of populist politicians in South Korea.