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U.S. Policy Toward South Korea

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East Asian and Pacific Affairs

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for inviting me here today to testify on U.S. policy on Korea. I am privileged to be asked to offer my judgements on a matter of growing concern to U.S. policymakers.

I have read with interest the resolutions introduced by the Chairman and his colleagues in the Congress. These statements voice a support for democracy in South Korea that many Koreans have been waiting to hear. They provide needed encouragement to the democratic movement there.

I serve as President of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, which has worked in Korea for the better part of two years to encourage a peaceful transition to full democracy. During that time, we have maintained contact with both the ruling Democratic Justice Party (DJP) and the opposition New Korea Democratic Party (NKDP).

The Board of the National Democratic Institute does not make policy recommendations, and on policy questions I speak, not for NDI,

Several other meetings have been held with representatives of the two Korean parties, the most recent being last weekend at a conference of international women political leaders in San Francisco, in which members of both major Korean parties participated. In each meeting held or project conducted with Korean political leaders we have provided information on political development and encouraged both sides to find solutions to the political crisis which grips their country.

I would like to confine my remarks to the political situation in Korea today. A transition is underway in Korea, although there is a good deal of justifiable fear that the current impasse between the government and the opposition will end positive movement toward a more representative governmental system.

Witnesses before this Committee will underscore the crucial importance of Korea to the United States. Our security and economic interests are well understood and accepted by conservatives and liberals alike. Nor is there serious debate among Americans over our aspirations for Korea. Most Americans would like to see a successful transition to a full democracy, which we assume will produce an even stronger ally and trading partner.

The debate, therefore, is not over the objective, but rather the role the United States can or should play in encouraging our Korean friends to reach this objective.

Though he has done so in qualified terms, Mr. Sigur has raised the issue of "legitimacy," the notion that a government must have standing in the eyes of its people if it is going to motivate and mobilize them. Serious questions have been raised about the legitimacy of the current government; none more important than those raised by the Korean people themselves.

Despite great economic progress and the outpouring of national pride which followed the choice of Seoul for the 1988 Olympic Games, the Chun government continues to arouse more skepticism than support. If the Chun government is in trouble, it is not because of unruly student demonstrations or opposition criticisms. Rather, it is in trouble because it has created serious doubts in the minds of the middle class. Evidence of this abounds; it is reflected in the rare public opinion polls which have surfaced and it is palpable to even the most casual visitor to Korea.

This government came to power in 1980, unfortunately in a manner not uncharacteristic of Korean governments, by military coup. A constitution was written and enacted by the National Assembly in a highly questionable process which produced little if any legitimacy. This constitution, and the electoral system subsequently created, continue to be at the heart of the criticism of the Chun regime.

A distinguished former U.S. Ambassador to Korea, William Gleysteen, has written that "excessive pressure or signs of U.S. dissatisfaction affect the 'legitimacy' and survival of a Korean leader." Seven years after the Chun regime took power in a military

The belated decision to allow the February 1985 election, President Chun's announcement last year reiterating that he would step down in 1988, and his belated agreement to negotiate constitutional reform before his successor is elected were all examples of concessions made under pressure. He should receive approval from Koreans for each of these actions, but he denied himself important public credits by seeming to act reluctantly, after too much delay.

The new realities of Korea include a younger generation which is increasingly educated and mobile. Sixty percent of those who voted in the 1985 election were under 40 years of age. Many of these voters have been exposed to democratic practitioners and philosophers in Japan, the United States, Europe, and, now increasingly, in their own country. This group voted overwhelmingly for opposition parties in 1985, and it continues to provide the base of support for the New Korea Democratic Party, a coalition of opposition factions which strongly supports democratic change.

The economic "miracle," as it is called in Korea, has also contributed to the change in voters' attitudes. The hierarchical patterns of a Confucian society are breaking down as consumers become accustomed to making market decisions for themselves. Middle class people are appealed to by commercial interests and, while they develop a healthy and stabilizing stake in the continuation of a free enterprise system, they also learn that individual opinion counts.

Within this changed environment, it might be argued that both the Chun regime and the opposition NKDP are miscalculating in stubbornly

negotiations, for example, can be distorted by faulty assumptions and low expectations.

The suspended inter-party negotiation in Korea is not just about the form of the governmental system. It is about legitimacy, popular will and political power. Believing it possesses the most popular candidates, the opposition advocates direct elections in a presidential system. Perhaps conceding this, the ruling party plays to its own strength with a parliamentary, ministerial system. Either system could pass muster as a legitimate democratic system if it is supported by a valid electoral process and laws protecting political rights.

Is it our role to pressure both sides equally? Perhaps so publicly, for reasons of diplomacy; however, we mustn't forget who holds the power -- the government.

Before a good-faith negotiation can commence in Korea, a good-faith initiative should be taken by the government. The basic civil and political rights -- free speech, assembly, press and petition -- should be put in place now. They should not be held hostage to the negotiations over the ultimate constitutional system.

It is difficult to find compromises in today's Korea. It is my sad conclusion that the barrier to compromise has been erected by a weak government afraid to take the logical first step to create the conditions for compromise. That would be the effect of removing by governmental decree restrictions on civil and political rights. With

Public diplomacy must be an important part of our policy, if only to assure that the Korean government, the opposition, and the people have an unmistakable understanding of U.S. interests. Administration officials should make clear that no nation which acts undemocratically can expect to have as close a relationship as would otherwise be possible in such fields as security, economics, cultural exchange and trade.

The security relationship should be described with precision so that no one is under illusions about it. Our presence is vitally important geopolitically as an essential factor of regional stability. Our presence is also a source of stability in Korea and an essential element in providing protection against a real threat from the North. It would be a dangerous miscalculation on the part of opposition elements to assume that our military presence is a potential source of leverage against the government.

At the same time, we must make it clear to the Korean military that their continued involvement in politics will negatively affect our ability to work with them. Somehow we should attempt to convince them that their sense of military professionalism should exclude political involvement -- a difficult task, but not impossible.

Ambassador Gleysteen's admonition against "excessive" public pressure constitutes good counsel; however, this should not be used as an excuse for avoiding a factual description of a serious situation. In addition, no U.S. Government statement in the current context could raise any more serious questions about the legitimacy

Finding the correct words and the appropriate pressure points will not be easy. The task will be further complicated, however, if we allow certain unacceptable and negative assumptions to cloud our judgement. Those in the ruling party and in the opposition who are serious about change are looking to us for support. They will only be frustrated if the underlying premise of our policy is pessimism -- if we base our policy on an assumption that the Korean people are incapable of achieving democracy.

As the world's leading democracy and as a friend, we can have great influence in Korea. Much is at stake in helping both the ruling party and the opposition live up to their stated positions. The Administration, with the Sigur speech, has made a beginning. I hope the effort will continue in earnest.