Since democratization in 1987, South Korea’s progressive parties have produced less than half of the presidents elected to office. During their brief tenures, however, these administrations have deployed troops to Iraq, negotiated the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement, and overseen the expansion of the country’s defense budget and capabilities. Despite this record, South Korea’s progressive foreign policy posture has sometimes been caricatured as “anti-American.” With another presidential election around the corner, this is
a series—in conjunction with the discussion on February 23, 2022—designed to examine why this sentiment might exist in the United States and what South Korea’s progressive parties see as their foreign policy aims. This article is the first of three in the series.

Part I: U.S. Foreign Policy Experts’ Historical Understanding of South Korea’s Domestic Politics

The Republic of Korea is the linchpin of the U.S. alliance network in East Asia. Closely situated to China, South Korea is both a liberal democracy and an underrated military power. Moreover, it is an essential part of the global supply of critical technological products such as semiconductors and batteries for electric vehicle. The country’s soft power extends from pop culture to stories of its transition from military dictatorship to democracy, which has found an audience throughout the world. In places like Myanmar, Thailand, and Hong Kong—as well as Chile, Colombia, and Peru—protesters sing K-pop as their anthem, hold candlelight protests as Koreans do, and gather to watch movies like A Taxi Driver for inspiration. In addition, Korea’s successful response to the COVID-19 further raised its international profile as the world continues to grapple with the pandemic.

Yet the foreign policy circles of Washington, DC pay relatively little attention to South Korea’s domestic politics. To a certain extent, this is understandable; the United States prioritizes the analysis of how a foreign country would interact with Washington before turning to how the country manages its own affairs. But a country’s foreign policy is driven by domestic politics; plainly, the result of an election could change the course of a country’s foreign policy direction. Compared to the amount of attention devoted to the domestic politics of peer countries such as the United Kingdom or France, the quantity and quality of discourse regarding South Korea’s domestic politics in Washington, DC are improving but remain deficient.

Between South Korea’s two major political factions, conservatives and liberals, this gap in DC’s knowledge is particularly acute with respect to liberals. For historical reasons explained further below, U.S. interaction with South Korea’s liberals has been shorter in time and shallower in quality. Reductive heuristics, and sometimes active distortion, fill this gap, leading to a misperception of reality that fails to explain past events and set reasonable expectations for the future.
This series seeks to call attention to this gap, and take a small step toward addressing it. Part I of this series will review the current state of Washington, DC’s understanding of South Korean domestic politics, and how the history of U.S.-ROK interaction affected and sometimes distorted this understanding. Part II will trace the history of South Korea’s political divide, and the manner in which this history informs South Korean liberals’ basic philosophy with respect to foreign policy. Part III will analyze how South Korea’s three liberal presidents, Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun and Moon Jae-in, actualized this philosophy in their foreign policy, particularly with respect to North Korea, United States, Japan and China.

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Before turning to South Korea, it would be useful to hold up a mirror on Washington, DC and consider how its foreign policy circles have understood South Korean politics. The modern relationship between the United States and the Republic of Korea grew out of the Cold War, as the U.S. acted as a sponsor of a South Korea that stood in opposition to the communist North Korea. This history affected not only the character of U.S.-ROK relations, but also the manner in which U.S. experts of Korea were produced, and how they analyzed South Korea’s domestic politics.

Since the founding of the Republic of Korea in 1948, the country spent most of its history under a succession of right-wing dictators: Syngman Rhee, Park Chung-hee, and Chun Doo-hwan. In 1987, the Chun dictatorship fell and South Korea transitioned into the democratic regime that continues to this day. In those four decades, the United States was the chief sponsor of the South Korean dictatorship, using the perceived exigency of the Cold War as the reason to condone and tolerate the dictators’ authoritarianism and mass murder.

A particularly egregious example is the U.S. response to the Gwangju Uprising in May 1980. Only a few months after Chun Doo-hwan’s paratroopers brutally cracked down the protests by massacring hundreds, President Ronald Reagan invited Chun to the White House in an attempt to bolster U.S.-ROK relations that underwent a low point during the Carter administration. The memorandum to the president by Richard Allen, the National Security Advisor to Reagan, was clear-eyed on what Chun’s visit meant: “Chun’s ability to
meet with you validates and legitimizes his leadership as no other single event could."
Nevertheless, the White House meeting proceeded in February 1981, validating and
legitimizing Chun's usurpation and mass murder.

To be sure, the U.S.'s role in South Korea's transition to democracy is a complex subject,
and the United States played a constructive role in the development of South Korean
democracy in several key aspects. Even the Chun-Reagan meeting had a silver lining: in
exchange for agreeing to meet, the Reagan administration negotiated the release of the
famed democracy activist Kim Dae-jung, who at the time was facing the death penalty. At
any rate, litigating the merits of U.S. relationship with South Korea during its dictatorship
period is beyond the scope of this discussion. For our purpose, it would be sufficient to
say that the four decades of U.S. interaction with South Korea during the Cold War shaped
the way in which the U.S. expertise on South Korean domestic politics was cultivated.

Because U.S.-ROK relations revolved primarily around the issue of regional security in the
context of the Cold War, the U.S. understanding of South Korean politics was also filtered
through this framework. Most American experts on Korea had military, intelligence or
diplomatic background, whose primary interest in South Korea's domestic politics was its
implication on the U.S. strategy in Asia, particularly with respect to North Korea. Few could
claim expertise on South Korean politics proper. Until recently, few could speak or read
Korean, rendering them unable to process information flowing from the country
immediately and without an English-speaking intermediary (who were usually Koreans
fluent in English, often with their own agendas on what type of information should be
provided to the Americans.) Although some corners of the DC foreign policy makers
developed an admiration for Kim Dae-jung, for the most part there was little engagement
between U.S. experts and the vibrant, progressive civil society that South Korea has been
developing through the 1970s and 80s.

Today's South Korea is a vastly different country from 40 years ago. Yet these trends within
DC's foreign policy circles largely continue to this day. Although a bumper crop of younger
Korea scholars and experts with a different perspective are emerging, it is still the case that
most Korea experts in Washington come from diplomatic, military, or intelligence
background focusing primarily on North Korea and its nuclear program, speak little
Korean, and have no interest in South Korean politics beyond its implications for U.S.
strategy in Asia. Lacking the ability to understand the personal motivations of Korea's
leaders and the power dynamics that shape their decision-making process, U.S. analysis of South Korean politics tends to be either shallow, venturing no further than surface level analysis of official pronouncements, or untethered to reality, substituting evidence with heuristics.

As a democracy, attitude toward the legacy of dictatorship became the primary marker of the left-right divide in South Korean politics. By and large, South Korea's conservatives were former members of the dictatorship, joined by some of the right-leaning democracy activists, most notably Kim Young-sam. On the other hand, South Korea's liberals were the left-leaning democracy activists, whose primary champion was Kim Dae-jung. While this divide became somewhat porous in the recent years, the dynamics remain fundamentally the same. The last conservative president of South Korea was Park Geun-hye, daughter of the dictator Park Chung-hee. The last (and current) president of South Korea is Moon Jae-in, former civil rights attorney renowned for his protests against the dictatorship.

The manner in which South Korea's primary political divide was formed, combined with the composition of Korea experts in Washington, created a stilted understanding of South Korean politics in the United States that works to the disadvantage of Korea's liberals. The primary disadvantage is the lack of historical interactions. While South Korea's conservatives – dating back to the dictatorship era – have formally and informally interacted with the U.S. policymaking community since the 1940s, the liberals did not have the same opportunity until the late 1990s, when Kim Dae-jung became South Korea's first center-left president. Within the DC foreign policy circles, the conservatives’ view of South Korean society is overwhelmingly more prevalent, if only because that viewpoint has been the only available one in Washington.

Mutual suspicion has not helped either. During the dictatorship era, U.S. regarded South Korea's student protesters primarily as a “threat to political stability,” as a State Department memo put it in 1981, rather than fighters for freedom and democracy. Notwithstanding the admiration for Kim Dae-jung, the DC foreign policy circles – informed by South Korea's military dictatorship – considered the leftist protesters, who eventually became South Korea's progressive leaders, to be radicals with communist sympathies. Korean liberals' assessment of the United States was likewise uncharitable, as Washington had stood by decades of mass-murdering dictators in Korea. Already hamstrung by the late start, this bilateral skepticism slowed the relationship-building between South Korean liberals and the U.S. foreign policy circles.
From the U.S. perspective, the net result is a foreign policy circle in Washington, DC that is unable to understand Seoul when the liberals are in power. Presumptuous bias, or worse, outright hostility and motive-questioning, contaminate the U.S. views of South Korean politics. Under this misguided understanding, Korean conservatives are reflexively considered “tough” on national security, while liberals “weak”, “appeasing” and “anti-American.” During the Roh Moo-hyun administration, for example, DC foreign policy think tanks often referred to Roh’s foreign policy team as “the Taliban.” A recent column on the Washington Post claimed the conservative opposition to the Moon Jae-in administration would be tougher on China if it prevailed in the next presidential election, even though it was only six years ago that Korea’s last conservative president, Park Geun-hye, was the only leader of a democratic country to attend China’s military parade in Beijing for 70th anniversary commemoration of the end of World War II, applauding the People’s Liberation Army standing with Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin.

This distorted view simultaneously fails to explain past events and make a reasonable prediction for the future. The supposedly “appeasing” liberals of South Korea have scored major military victories against North Korea, such as the Yeonpyeong-do Island skirmishes in 1999 and 2002, in which the ROK Navy under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations sank the attacking North Korean naval ships. On the other hand, the supposedly “tough” conservatives like Roh Tae-woo issued the July 7 Declaration in 1988 that called for inter-Korean exchange and free trade between the two Koreas, and Lee Myung-bak allegedly sought an inter-Korean summit with a promise for cash shortly after North Korea’s submarine attacked and sank the ROK Navy corvette Cheonan in 2010. These events are rarely referenced in the U.S. analysis of South Korea’s inter-Korean policy, because they do not fit easily into the existing framework of analysis for Korea’s domestic politics.

Similarly, when a liberal Moon Jae-in was elected in 2017, he was reflexively labeled as anti-American. Yet Moon stood firm on the U.S.-ROK alliance throughout the challenges of the Donald Trump presidency when many other governments questioned their partnership with the United States. When Moon was scheduled to meet with Joe Biden for the first time in May 2021, many commentators speculated the meeting may not go well, supposedly because of the differences that Moon and Biden had with respect to North Korea and China. Those predictions were wrong: not only did the two leaders affirm their alignment on North Korea and China (for example, by reiterating the Singapore agreement between
U.S. and North Korea as well as South Korea's commitment to peace in the Taiwan Strait) they also greatly expanded the scope of U.S.-ROK cooperation to climate change, Central America, and lunar exploration. Left uncorrected, the mindset that created these wrong predictions may turn them into self-fulfilling prophecies by sowing suspicion and skepticism between the two allies whenever there is a liberal administration in Korea.

Given the significance of South Korea for U.S. foreign policy, it is critically important for Washington, DC to recognize its blind spots with respect to Korea, and understand how it came to form those blind spots. Above all, an evidence-based approach of understanding South Korea, based on a rigorous study of actual events on the ground, untainted by the historical and ideological lens, is more necessary than ever.

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The author is deeply thankful to Korea Economic Institute for its encouragement to present this series. Picture from the flickr account of the Republic of Korea

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