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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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South Korea: An Increase in Anti-US Sentiment?



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Summary

Recent attacks on US facilities in South Korea have been the work of a relatively small number of radicals who are seeking to foment an upsurge in anti-American sentiment. Nonetheless, friction between Washington and Seoul over economic, political, and security issues could fuel a more broadly based popular reaction. The more open political environment under President Roh Tae Woo has emboldened critics of US-South Korean relations, opening the way for a freewheeling scrutiny of bilateral ties, particularly sensitive trade and security topics.



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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Office of East Asian Analysis. Information available as of 03 June 1988 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Korea Branch, Northeast Asia Division, OEA, [redacted]

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Changing Attitudes

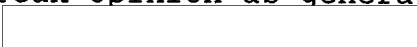
Attacks by radical groups on US facilities represent an obvious effort to tap latent anti-US sentiment:

- o Assaults on the USIS building, the US Embassy, and the Korea-America Bank in Seoul, as well as the USIS building in Kwangju City figured prominently during protests marking the May anniversary of the Kwangju riots in 1980.



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- o Press coverage, editorial views, and other media commentary have criticized the radicals' violence but portrayed South Korean opinion as generally sympathetic to their motives.



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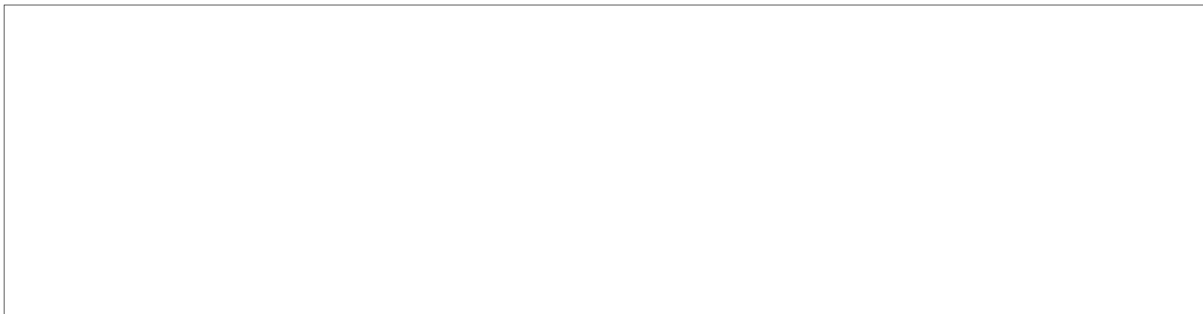
The media appear to reflect a steady shift in popular sentiments. Independent opinion polling suggests the generally positive view of the United States held by most Koreans--while still prevalent--has been eroding in the 1980s. Generational change, growing nationalism, pride over Korea's impressive economic performance, and a desire for a more independent Korean position on a variety of issues all have contributed to greater assertiveness and increased frictions.



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In our view, several specific factors account for the evolution of such attitudes:¹

- o The perception among most Koreans that Washington sanctioned the government's suppression of the 1980 Kwangju riots has done the most to tarnish the US image. Opposition leaders have played on this view by claiming that Washington continued to look the other way on human rights abuses during former President Chun's administration.
- o Despite his obvious break with Chun's repressive policies, Roh is still widely viewed as a president who leads an administration similar to his predecessor's military-backed government. Many Koreans are still



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skeptical that he can stand alone without the same support apparatus--including a perceived US blessing--that sustained Chun.

- o Other US actions, particularly pressures for market liberalization, have added to resentment among mainstream Koreans. Press commentary, as well as opinion polls, suggest many Koreans view US trade initiatives as unfair. Government compromises during bilateral negotiations, for example, have already provided political ammunition to the moderate opposition and radicals who cite concessions as capitulation to an overbearing US policy. [redacted]

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Outlook

While the more open political environment has allowed existing anti-Americanism to come out of the closet, it has also opened the way for this sentiment to gain popular acceptance. The freer political atmosphere entails more opportunity for critics of both the government and Washington to assert themselves on sensitive issues, such as trade and security policy:

- o The US-South Korean defense relationship is certain to remain high on the agenda. Radical criticism of US operational control of the Combined Forces Command (CFC) and the presence of US troops in South Korea have prompted many moderate Koreans to openly question important aspects of the security tie. Despite seeing US ground troops as the cornerstone of deterrence against attack from the North, many Koreans, including many military officers, see as an embarrassment the fact that a US General leads the CFC.
- o Radical efforts to portray US troops as the primary obstacle to reunification also have struck a responsive chord among moderate opposition groups. For example, many dissident newspapers have adopted the radicals' anti-US program, broadening the calls for troop withdrawals and the prohibition of nuclear weapons and ships from Korea. [redacted]

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A crackdown on dissidents and radicals, in our view, will not put the genie back in the bottle. In the current National Assembly session, the opposition is planning investigations of the Kwangju incident and misdeeds of the Chun administration--both issues with potentially sensitive US angles. [redacted]

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Against this backdrop, Roh will face hurdles in managing relations with Washington. For example, on sensitive trade issues, negotiations with Seoul are likely to be sticky as the government attempts to demonstrate it is

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not conceding unnecessarily to outside pressure. Economic officials are already stating they will be less likely to propose market liberalization because of the recent upsurge in anti-US feeling,

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