

South Koreans fear U.S. troop pullout

by Lydia Cherry

Republic of Korea President Noh Tae-Woo held a rare press conference with foreign correspondents June 28 to voice concern about a U.S. Senate bill introduced by Sen. Dale Bumpers (D-Ark.) that would cut back U.S. forces in Korea by 10,000 over three years. "The American troop presence has been maintaining peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and in this part of the world for more than 35 years," he said. "You have an expression in America. 'If it ain't broke don't fix it,' and I think it neatly applies to this situation," he said. He added that "recent developments in China affect Chinese ability to restrain North Korea" from possible aggression from the South.

President Noh's statement is one of many made by South Korean officials and spokesmen since Senate Armed Services Committee senior member Carl Levin (D-Mich.) first proposed on June 2 that U.S. force strength be cut from 43,000 to about 10,000 over the next five years.

Defense Minister Lee San Hoon meets with his U.S. counterpart, Dick Cheney, on July 17-19 and plans to ask Washington to agree in writing that the U.S. will not pull out troops without consulting Seoul. Many South Koreans think the Levin-Bumper's proposals will end up being policy, and Korean press in recent weeks has reflected this perception. "It seems that U.S. public opinion and the U.S. administration's view in connection with the issue of reducing U.S. troops stationed in South Korea are generally similar to Senator's Levin's view," newspaper *Choson Ilbo* noted June 4: "There is a high probability that Levin's proposal will be adopted . . . by the U.S. administration as policy."

Speaking at the World Forum in Colorado on June 24, in the presence of a conservative opposition party leader Kim Chong-pil, who evidently put Cheney on the spot, the defense secretary claimed the Congress could raise the question of removing American troops from overseas for budget reasons, but that the administration plans to judge the matter from the standpoint of security and strategy.

The New York Council on Foreign Relations came up with the withdrawal blueprint for the peninsula as early as 1987. Lately, the U.S. has been badgering Seoul to make a deal with the Soviets, North Korea, and China—before the U.S. troops leave. (Alas, "deals" with duplicitous Communist regimes have little holding power.) The Noh Tae-Woo government—and its various back-channel players—have been seeking an arrangement with Moscow, whereby Mos-

cow would help control and mediate a settlement with the Kim Il-sung regime. But if the U.S. pulls out the rug and gives Moscow and Pyongyang the unilateral concession of a troop pullback, Seoul will have no bargaining chips.

Moscow also wants a deal with South Korea. Plans are afoot to employ South Korean capital and labor to develop Siberia—in essence to use South Korea in the way Moscow wanted to use Japan, when Japan balked and refused unless Moscow agreed to significant territorial concessions.

Kim Young-sam takes center stage

South Korean opposition leader Kim Young-sam, who heads the Reunification Democratic Party, returned from Moscow June 19, claiming his visit "will mark an epoch in ending the Cold War-ridden relations between the two countries." Kim was hosted by Yevgeni Primakov, Central Committee member and head of the Moscow Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO). In meetings Kim and Primakov "exchanged views on the Korean peninsula and ways of promoting economic exchanges between Seoul and Moscow," the *Korea Times* reported June 4.

A "surprise feature" was a meeting with Ho Tam, the chairman of the North Korean Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland and a close relative of the leader of the North, Kim Il-sung. Ho Tam reportedly told Kim that the North will soon respond to the South's call for dialogue. Kim Young-sam later reported that North Korea had tried, unsuccessfully, to pressure him to drop everything and go to Pyongyang to meet with Kim Il-sung.

The South Korean paper *Tong-a Ilbo* reported June 16 that IMEMO's mediating role had transformed the Soviets in a few weeks from a helpful bystander into taking "elaborate action." High-ranking officials of IMEMO will return the visit to Seoul June 30, and are scheduled to have working-level contact with Kim's RDP to discuss exchanges between the two nations.

One of the fruits of the Moscow visit, according to Kim—who described himself at the National Press Club on June 16 as Korea's "Willy Brandt"—was that the Soviet government will permit ethnic Koreans on Sakhalin Island to return home permanently if they so choose. The pro-government *Korea Herald* June 24 noted that "Moscow took a substantial step during Kim's visit to add weight to the political importance of the visit and to win the hearts of South Koreans."

The *Herald* noted that high government officials of both sides had exchanged low-profile visits over the past year, but that Moscow had gone high-profile with the Kim visit, giving it hefty press coverage. Noting that Seoul and the U.S. had repeatedly asked Moscow to persuade Pyongyang to engage in dialogue which it had consistently refused, the *Herald* suggests that Moscow's "change of stance may have something to do with its ambitious efforts to strengthen its influence in Northeast Asia, long regarded as the turf of the United States."