

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

The Beef Crisis in South Korea

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Q1: What are the immediate issues that underlie the current political crisis in South Korea?

A1: President Lee Myung-Bak's decision to lift the import restrictions on U.S. beef, imposed in 2003 due to the purported risk of mad cow disease, set off fierce protests across Korea for the past 40 days. The agreement was settled on the eve of Lee's summit with President George W. Bush in April. The Korean public was infuriated by this agreement, perceiving that Lee had neglected to consult with the public or with experts on this issue, and viewed it as a "humiliating concession" to the United States, in which the public's health was being put at risk. Lee's agreement was also seen as a "political gift" to President Bush before the summit, which was publicly characterized as a subservient Korean king offering tribute to a more powerful Chinese emperor. Young Koreans took to the streets in organized candlelight demonstrations, demanding renegotiation with the United States. Candlelight protests quickly gained broader public support as others, including civic groups, leftists, opposition politicians, and the media, continued to add fuel to the fire. The media and online commentators helped spread rumors that Americans do not eat U.S. beef but rather consume imported beef from Australia and that Koreans have a gene more susceptible to mad cow disease than Europeans, all of which have further exacerbated negative public sentiment. Aside from beef, public grievances and disappointment toward Lee were already simmering due to his perceived "heavy-handed" leadership style and continuous efforts to pursue unpopular policies, including a proposed \$15 billion canal project. Lee's appointment of his cabinet and the Blue House of individuals who were deemed of questionable ethics badly damaged his credibility and the popularity of his government—even among his conservative base—virtually from the outset of his coming to power in February. All this fueled the subsequent beef protests—the largest antigovernment street protests in Korea in 20 years.

Q2: What does this crisis say about the political, economic, and social conditions in South Korea today?

A2: Less than four months after taking office, President Lee Myung-Bak has lost much of the people's confidence and badly damaged his ability to lead, which is reflected in his dismal 15 percent approval rating. Even if the current issues surrounding the import of beef are resolved through compromises between Seoul and Washington, it remains unclear whether that would pacify the public and allow Korea to put an end to the current political and social unrest. Lee's political opponents and Leftists are taking this opportunity to inflict damage on the Lee government by continuing the protests. Activist groups and farmers are likely to continue protesting and demonstrating as they believe that beef imports will eventually hurt Korean farmers. Overall, however, changes within Korean society are making it more complicated for Lee to run the country than it was for his conservative predecessors. Younger generations, the main forces in the protests against Lee, are more nationalistic and have a greater sense of national confidence, pride, and independence than the older generations. Resort to popular street demonstrations and candlelight vigils are more common given the legacy of the younger generation's experience during the democracy movement of the 1980s. Furthermore, the Korean public is very conscious and wary of the deteriorating economy, which has not improved since Lee took office. The broad social unrest demonstrated by the recent strikes of trade unions, truckers, and other civil groups derives from popular anxieties and discontent about sagging economic growth and rising inflation, as well as a reaction against Lee's push for new trade and regulatory policies favored by foreign investors and big businesses.

Q3: What are the likely implications for the future of U.S.-Korea relations?

A3: It is likely that there will be long-term damage to U.S.-Korea relations as a result of the recent crisis. A large majority of Koreans are not anti-American, and in fact the protests are directed more at the Korean government than at the United States. Nonetheless, this development should serve as a wake-up call to both capitals. Both Washington and Seoul must take responsibility for containing the damage from the crisis and find a way forward that does not harm overall U.S.-Korea relations. If the protests continue, the United States may continue to come under fire, and some fear increasing anti-Americanism in South Korea. Leftist groups are spreading false and distorted rumors to spur anti-American sentiment among the public, such as "Korea will become a dumping ground for the meat Americans don't eat." U.S. ambassador

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Alexander Vershbow already received a taste of the growing anti-American sentiment when he emphasized the safety of U.S. beef two weeks ago. In the future, the United States and Korea will need to be more sensitive to the political and social winds on the other side to ensure that future agreements meant to strengthen and deepen the alliance are enforceable and sustainable.

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