

Creative Pragmatism: Move Forward beyond Ideology

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Goh, Kun,

Former Prime Minister of the Republic of Korea

Professor Blacker, Director Shin, Mr. Shorenstein, distinguished members of the Stanford community, and ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to have this opportunity to speak to you at this Asian Leader's Forum, a time-honored tradition of Stanford University. I am particularly pleased to be here at this time of the year when we offer thanks for our annual harvest. In this regard, let me express my deep appreciation for all the people who have made it possible for me to come here.

Beyond the pleasure of addressing this distinguished audience, I have more to harvest on this trip. For many years, I have wanted to visit Stanford University and the Silicon Valley, but somehow couldn't catch the chance. Now as I am standing here, I can feel the energy and vitality of the spirit of innovation for which Stanford University has been so justly known worldwide.

There is one more thing. When I was young, I devoted myself to the greening of Korea's mountains which had been devastated during the Korean War. Ever since, I have been interested in trees. Having heard the city name of Palo Alto was actually derived from a tall tree still standing in the city of Palo Alto, I was anxious to know what kind of plant it was. Now, I can at last satisfy my curiosity before going home.

Ladies and gentlemen!

I've been asked to talk about leadership here today. Of course, I'm not a specialist in leadership studies. However, I would not decline the title, "a life-long practitioner of leadership." Shuttling back and forth between various public posts and hatless private life, I have long lived in the world of leadership, watching it practiced and practicing it myself in one way or another.

My life-long involvement with leadership has taught me, time and again, how enormous its consequences can be and how grave its responsibility must be. In March last year, I was forced to confront such a situation when the incumbent President was impeached by the Congress. This was the first time in Korea's constitutional history.

The new government was just one year old at that time and its capability to perform was yet to be tested. The unexpected Presidential impeachment sent strong shock waves throughout the world as well as to various walks of Korean society. The stock market began to fluctuate heavily, and a security scare began to spread rapidly among the Korean public. With the impeachment I became, in accord with the Constitution, the Acting President, and from that moment on, around the clock, I could not take my hands off the emergency telephone, directing measures to bring the situation under control. Even though things returned to normalcy later, it was a moment of leadership crisis, and the leadership crisis amounted to a national crisis.

Now, the constitutional crisis caused by the impeachment has been resolved, but the political leadership crisis has not gone. Although the Constitutional Court ruled against the Congressional impeachment, public trust in the government and the ruling party has plummeted, and disillusion with politics and politicians are rampant. Despair over the present state of affairs as well as the anxiety about the future of the country have pervaded Korean society.

I believe the essence of leadership lies in "the ability to bring together the dreams and capacities of social constituents together with a clear and open vision for the future and work together with them to accomplish what the times require." Exactly in this regard, I think political leadership in Korea is not playing its proper role. The present state of affairs in Korea makes political leadership an inevitable, urgent and crucial issue that needs to be attended, and that is what I shall attempt to do here today.

Having said this, I shall proceed today in the following steps. First, I will look at the historical circumstances facing Korean society. Second, I will examine where our political leadership stands today. Third, I will see whether or not the current leadership is meeting today's needs in Korea. Finally, I will outline what I call "creative pragmatism" as an alternative leadership model.

An era of uncertainty, a multiple-risk society

Having successfully overcome the financial crisis that hit the country hard at the end of the last century, the Koreans embraced the new millennium with much optimism. Encouraged by the World Cup victories in 2002, Koreans felt united for once, and eagerly looked toward a bright, prosperous future. Just three years have passed since, but despair and division, instead of hope and harmony, have permeated Korean society today.

The social landscape of everyday life is rather stark in Korea today. Ordinary people are finding it increasingly difficult to make their daily living, and the nation's growth engines are sputtering. Youth unemployment has reached a serious level. Income polarization is widening. Conflicts are growing between labor and management, urban and rural districts, the capital area and the provinces, the haves and the have-nots. General distrust is deepening even in the nation's educational system, the heart of my country's future.

The political and economic contours of East Asia are also changing. The Chinese economy is growing rapidly, and Japan is reviving after a decade-long slump. In-between, Korea's standing room is getting smaller and smaller. The winds of nationalism are blowing increasingly stronger. Even in this post-Cold War era, tensions on the Korean Peninsula have not eased substantially. North Korea remains a closed state.

The world as a whole is undergoing a seismic change. Gone is the "era of extremes," marked by the confrontation between capitalism and socialism. It has been replaced by an "era of confusion". While the wave of "globalization" is spreading rapidly amid the inescapable restructuring of capitalism, the "welfare state" is on the decline and "neo-liberalism" is expanding throughout the world. The tangle of changes inside and outside of my country is throwing our present life into confusion while making our future uncertain.

The time of rapid growth in Korea was an "era of certainty," in which white was white and black was black. There was widespread consensus over the goal of economic growth, and the cold war made it easy to distinguish friends from foes. The situation was not much different among the

dissidents who rebelled against the dictatorial regime; the government was evil and the pro-dissidents good. It was a time when people felt no qualms making black and white categorizations.

However, in today's "era of uncertainty" Korea has become pluralistic and its values diversified. Not only has authoritarianism collapsed, but also authority itself is being undermined. The values and categories we took for granted in the past have been shaken. No longer is it possible to make a black and white decision. Convictions on the efficacy of policies are frequently challenged, and the merits of development are often in doubt. Indeed, trust, the very foundation of Korean society, appears to be eroding.

The time of uncertainty brings new risks. Sources and types of these risks are manifold. We are increasingly susceptible to the destruction of the natural environment, disruption of ecological balance and the resulting outbreak of calamitous diseases such as SARS, AI, or mad cow disease. Uncertainty can also fuel conflicts and confrontation, and even instigate terrorism and war.

Of course, many societies in this global village are showing signs of risk-taking. But few societies have modernized and industrialized more rapidly than Korea. Therefore, Korea cannot help being exposed to additional risks. Moreover, a confrontation between South and North Korea still continues, and Korea's geopolitical situation harbors a constant security threat. In short, Korea is being exposed to a complex set of risks. Korea has become a "multiple-risk society" in this era of uncertainty.

Ideological polarization: freedom versus equality

In the past authoritarian era, freedom and equality were made subservient to economic growth. The freedom of the market and of civil society was stifled. Equality took a back seat to the growth-first principle. Now, in today's democratic Korea, the suppressed values of equality and freedom are bursting forth under the contrasting labels of progressivism and conservatism.

My country's ruling camp poses itself as the standard-bearer of democratization and of "progressive" forces. The regime has put equality ahead of freedom. Economically, it tries to attain equality and balanced growth by allowing a strong government to intervene in the marketplace. It denounces the opposition's call for a right-sized government as an unjust plot by the privileged to keep their vested interests.

It seems that the more single mindedly the ruling camp pursues “equality,” the stronger the “conservative” opposition chases “liberty.” The latter group favors “expanding the pie before dividing it”; it stresses growth-first economic policies through sweeping deregulation. It criticizes the ruling camp for amateurish government that has recklessly been sapping the nation’s coffer for ill-advised “give-away” policies and programs.

The confrontation between progressives and conservatives seems to have emerged as the basic framework governing our society. It has moved beyond the level of political competition and argument to that of fundamental social division and conflict. The gaps produced by the distrust and hatred between progressives and conservatives and between ruling and opposition circles have grown too wide to close easily. Their interpretations of history have grown poles apart and even Korea’s national identity has become an object of controversy.

One may think the present situation means a step forward in the course of history, in which progressives and conservatives are vying with each other over the relative values of liberty and equality. However, as this confrontation reaches the level of an ideological polarization, it should be seen as a deadlock, not an advance. It is like a person willing to suffer from schizophrenia to escape from paranoia. Many dangers lurk in ideological polarization. In this context, I am going to raise three points.

First, liberty versus equality poses a false dichotomy. These values cannot be sacrificed to one another. Equality without liberty is the equality of slaves, and liberty without equality is the liberty of beasts. Liberal equality is more equal, and equal liberty is more liberal. True, the values of liberty and equality often collide with each other in real life. In such cases, however, a mature individual and a mature society do not choose between the two, but seek their harmony. Always electing only one alternative is possible only in unreflective minds indoctrinated by a single narrow ideology.

Secondly, when people put ideology before reality, they become victims of a distortion of reality, of self-righteousness, and of the illusion of infallibility. They eagerly pit themselves against “others” over imagined issues, while neglecting day-to-day matters and the problem of concrete implementation. An excess of ideology gives rise to populism, and ideological polarization results in social division.

Thirdly, the extreme conflicts between liberty and equality and between progressives and conservatives are legacies of the Cold War era, no longer valid or useful. The illusion of an equal

society without freedom ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The pursuit of liberty at the expense of equality, on the other hand, deepens social polarization and destroys communal values. Such has been evidenced even in advanced countries which have developed, unlike Korea, strong social safety nets.

In conclusion, I think a political leadership engrossed in strident debates over progressive versus conservative ideology does not help Korea cope with its multiple risks; rather, it hinders such efforts. That kind of leadership is anachronistic. It commits the absurdity of harking back to the black-or-white logic of the authoritarian era in order to overcome problems stemming precisely from that grim past.

Creative pragmatism

The only way to overcome the crisis of political leadership facing our society is to escape from the mirage of narrow and unreflective ideology and seek a truth based on reality. Ideology is but a lens through which we view the world; it is only one tool out of many. Human civilizations blossomed in ancient Athens and the Age of Annals in China, where diverse ideas were tolerated and allowed to unfold; civilizations stagnated in societies where states monopolized ideology, where fundamentalism and dogmatism reigned. It is time for the Korean political leadership to get away from the groundless belief that there is only one (or two) “true” lens through which to view the world.

And it is high time for the political leaders to go back to the core of what leadership is about after all: to characterize a harmonious vision while working together toward that which the times require of people. Divisive ideologies are unnecessary to tackle the crucial question of what is it that the times require of us.

What then does this era require of the Korean people? Needless to say, the most basic task is to create a “safe state,” to protect people from the multiple risks facing Korean society today. This involves reigniting economic growth, ameliorating social polarization, and reducing security threats; it requires maintaining ecological balance, working to prevent disasters, both natural and man-made, and coping with these problems when they occur.

Going one step further, our task is to create a “dynamic, strong country,” which is economically prosperous, environmentally friendly, and humane at the same time. It is a country which harmonizes state-of-the-art industries with traditional ones, and a country that both competes and cooperates with the rest of the world in a sincere and trusted fashion.

I would like to see a new type of leadership that determines social tasks and future visions on the basis of historical reality, not through a priori lens of ideology; I also hope to witness a new leadership which seeks to put form to these visions from the viewpoint of the Korean people. Such a leadership is pragmatic in that it puts reality ahead of ideology and ideas. But it is not conventional pragmatism content with the status quo but a creative one that positively opens the way to the future with vision. Hence, creative pragmatism.

The creative pragmatism that I propose pursues the following five points. Firstly, creative pragmatism advances a leadership of integration that stresses community, communication and solidarity. Korean society has become pluralistic with diverse values. The capacities of civic groups and business corporations have grown remarkably. The days are long gone when the government could meddle in everything. Only when elected leaders communicate and form solidarity with diverse social members, can they help to make good things happen. The virtue of leadership now lies not in exclusion but in inclusion. Cooperative governance, not top-down rule, is what creative leadership pursues.

Secondly, creative pragmatism pursues performance-oriented leadership that rewards actual accomplishment. Deng Xiaoping ignited China’s great reform with his “black-cat-white-cat” theory. He maintained it did not matter whether a cat is black or white as long as it was good at catching rats. Creative pragmatism values contexts over generalities, experiences over theories, and practice over words. However plausible a roadmap appears, it leads us nowhere unless backed by effective implementation of good programs. What matters is not whether a government is big or small, but how smart and agile it is.

Thirdly, creative pragmatism pursues a dynamically harmonious win-win leadership that protects the common good. Creative pragmatism believes that the right way most often lies in the middle or in the “golden mean.” It balances contrasting categories, such as liberty and equality, individual and group, market and state, and central and provincial areas, not from a zero-sum but a positive-sum viewpoint. It seeks a common denominator between conflicting standpoints by trying to stand in the other’s shoes. Creative pragmatism believes that true happiness lies in such communal values as love, wisdom, tolerance, virtue, benevolence, and harmony.

Fourthly, creative pragmatism pursues leadership of sustainable innovation. Thomas Edison invented the motion picture technology. But it was the New York capitalist-producers and Hollywood directors that made it the greatest cultural industry of the 20th century. Joseph Schumpeter emphasized that the innovative power that saves capitalism from crises is the very power that puts invention (or reform) to practical use. Creative pragmatism promotes the happy marriage of inventiveness with entrepreneurship of the form that has allowed the Silicon Valley to evolve to what it is now.

Fifthly, creative pragmatism pursues a liberal leadership that is open to the global community. Creative pragmatism acknowledges that Korea's security and prosperity are possible only when it is in harmony with the rest of the world. Although it values national communion highly, it rejects chauvinistic nationalism. It transcends the dichotomy of independence and subordination to seek "substantive independence" and "open independence." While actively taking part in the Asian era, it believes that the future of Korea as a peninsular state lies neither on the continent nor in the ocean but in linking the two.

Lessons from history

This is the 60th year since Korea was liberated from Japanese colonial rule. In Oriental philosophy, sixty is a special number when the 10 heavenly cycles and 12 earthly spaces complete their full circuit of combination. And therefore it signifies a fresh start. This is also why families gather together and throw a big party for those who meet the 60th birthday, called "hwangap" in Korean.

So, the 60th anniversary of national liberation is equivalent to "hwangap" for independent Korea. It deserved a big celebration by the entire society united into one. But things did not turn out that way on this year's National Liberation Day. Sadly, on that day, the progressive and conservative camps stuck fast to their opposed interpretations of the past 60 years. In the end, they held separate ceremonies. It was the first such happening in the 60-year-long history of celebrating the liberation day.

It is the irony of history that ideological polarization arises at this time in Korea. For Korea was one of the biggest victims of the "history of extremes" in the 20th century; a century filled with confrontations between the extremes of capitalism and socialism and imperialism and nationalism.

As Alexis de Tocqueville realized, the flower of democracy opened first in America, the country that materialized the spirits of democracy with realistic practices, but not in France, which toppled the monarchy with blood.

Since the nation's founding, the United States has created its history by overcoming crisis after crisis with a creativity and pragmatism unique to it. Among such pioneers of creative pragmatism was Senator Leland Stanford, who established this hall of intellect that surpasses the Ivy League schools of the East, in newly-developed California, as well as Professor Fred Terman of Stanford University, who gave birth to the information revolution.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The ideological debate over liberalism and conservatism is the vestige of the bygone days. Ideological wrangling neither helps us push through the multiple dangers brought upon by the era of globalization, nor develop the unlimited opportunities provided by the information era. Now is the time to shed this ideological legacy of a previous era.

As history shows, crisis contains the seeds of opportunity within it. In crisis, history finds momentum for progress. As I have said, Korea has become a multiple-risk society, as it enters into the era of uncertainty after undergoing rapid and intensive economic growth. However, opportunities are hidden within the risks and crises. Creative pragmatism is the key that will unlock the door to such opportunities.

Thank you very much for your attention.