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Rep. Kim sings praises of free trade

By Spencer H. Kim



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LOS ANGELES — When someone explains a fundamental truth in precise terms, it rings clear. But it is frustrating when people feel it necessary to muffle it, especially if it is someone you respect. Thus it is with my progressive friends in Korea and the issue of free trade.

Rep. Kim Jong-hoon recently visited my hometown of Los Angeles. He gave a seminar to about 150 people on free trade in general and the KORUS FTA specifically.

I consider myself quite knowledgeable, having been in international business for decades and serving as a U.S. delegate to the APEC Business Advisory Council.

But I was bowled over by Assemblyman Kim's PowerPoint, data-laden, analysis-rich presentation.

He traced the genesis of Korea's policy to seek FTAs to former President Kim Dae-jung, who ordered a first test case with Chile, and through former President Roh Moo-hyun's decision that an FTA with the U.S. was necessary if his country were to reach its economic potential.

Roh selected Kim, then a career diplomat who had long experience in the U.S. and in trade, to lead the FTA negotiations with the U.S.

Kim tied the FTAs beautifully to the universal truth that free trade expands a country's

economic pie. Of that there is no doubt, both in theory and, as shown repeatedly, in practice.

I felt a twinge of jealousy that Korea has a politician like Kim.

Most of my country's politicians try to straddle the issue. All but the most ignorant of them know that free trade expands the pie, but they think it would be politically foolish to take on directly the entrenched forces of the status quo, who fear they may lose some perceived current advantage if they have to compete internationally. (Congressman Kevin Brady of Texas being an exception: "America shouldn't retreat from competition in the world marketplace, we should insist on it.")

So why, when he was the builder of architect Roh Moo-hyun's dream of an FTA with the U.S., is Assemblyman Kim a member of the New Frontier Party? Why was there no place for him on the progressive side? Why did former president Lee Myung-bak, and the conservatives, get credit for ratifying the KORUS and ROK-EU FTAs, and over the objections of the progressives in Korea no less, when it was President Roh who began them?

When the economic pie expands, two things can happen: everyone can get a bigger piece of the pie or the rich can get richer while everyone else stays the same.

Domestic economic policy will determine what happens. Progressives may believe they are better suited to make sure the size of everyone's piece gets bigger and see the common man as their constituent.

But if they confine themselves to arguing over how the current pie is being divided and fail to enlarge the pie, then they are doing their constituents a disservice.

Kim Dae-jung was visionary in launching the FTA policy; Roh Moo-hyun was courageous in following through.

They understood. Today's progressives would do well to scrap their caution and display similar vision and courage.

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