

APRIL 2008

U.S.-South Korea Relations: Rekindling an Alliance Flame

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The honeymoon between Washington and Seoul will not last long without more harmony on the most important issue for the relationship: North Korean denuclearization.

At the Camp David press conference with new South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, President Bush accentuated the positive and ignored the negative by choosing not to mention North Korea in his opening remarks. It was the first sign of trouble in the new courtship between Washington and Seoul that began with Lee's inauguration in March. Lee's pro-U.S. stance and conservative approach to North Korea promised to bring the partners closer than they have been in a decade. His visit to Washington, D.C. in April should have set the course for alliance bliss. Lee was the first South Korean leader invited to Camp David. He was presented with a promise of visa waivers for South Koreans visiting America. The warm tone of his visit had been set in advance by landmark agreements to ease South Korean restrictions on importing American beef--a limit which threatened to derail congressional ratification of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS) negotiated last June.

Unfortunately, the summit did not live up to the expectations of its observers or participants. Beef and visas are the stuff of a great first date, but the strength of the long-term relationship rests on mutual understanding and trust about the toughest issues. In this case, the leaders must establish a common approach to

North Korea. The recent visit suggested to the world a startling switch of positions between Seoul and Washington and the continued lack of U.S. strategic coherence on the North Korea issue.

Who's Playing Bad Cop?

Lee Myung-bak was viewed by Washington as a breath of fresh air. He has called for a pragmatic approach to North Korea, in stark contrast to his predecessor and much more in tune with the Bush Administration. Under Lee, Seoul would demand that North Korea show results of its promises and receive minimal support without complete and accurate verification of its nuclear weapons program and activities. This is a drastic switch from a decade in which unrequited assistance from South Korea to the North worked at cross-purposes with a hard-line U.S. approach on verifiable denuclearization. In particular, the change meant Seoul would likely support Washington's "complete and correct" formulation that included not just plutonium reprocessing but also any uranium enrichment and proliferation activities to countries like Syria. Pyongyang responded in a predictable hard-line manner, with vicious rhetoric, expelling South Korean officials residing in North Korea, and belligerent missile launches.

Given the prospects for stronger U.S.-ROK relations, reports of a bilateral softening of the U.S. approach to North Korea just before the recent summit came as an unwelcome surprise. According to the New York Times, National Security Council officials confirmed reports that

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APRIL 2008

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“declarations regarding proliferation and uranium would be negotiated separately” from plutonium issues.¹ The signing of the not-so-secret “secret memoranda” between Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs, Christopher Hill, and North Korea’s chief diplomat, Kim Kye Gwan raised concerns about whether the United States and South Korea really do see eye-to-eye. Many in Seoul and other Asian capitals think this shift undermines earlier agreements and gives Pyongyang time to stall or evade true disarmament.

Similar concerns continue within the United States as officials spar over whether to insist on complete verifiable disarmament or prioritize progress on plutonium negotiations. Days after the Bush-Lee summit, the administration was quickly walking away from Chris Hill’s agreement and even made plans to brief Congress on evidence of North Korean proliferation to Syria. The White House’s release of specific intelligence, including video of the suspect site before it was

bombed by Israel, makes the split between Hill and the administration hardliners painfully clear.

Even though American officials insist the agreement will not change anything substantive, South Korean officials have focused more on the fact that the deal was made behind the back of the new President, undermining confidence between the allies and perhaps signaling to Kim Jong-Il that his recalcitrance can continue to pay off. One persistent difficulty in the Six-Party framework has been the ability of Pyongyang to play the parties off one another, particularly South Korea, Japan, and the United States. Unplanned trading back and forth from “good cop” to “bad cop” cannot be productive.

While the disconnect over America’s negotiating position reflects some possible substantive problems, it is much more indicative of issues of style and process that have long beleaguered the

1 Steven Lee Myers, “Bush Still Waits for North Korean Nuclear Report,” *The New York Times*, 20 April 2008.

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relationship. In many cases, even where substantive disagreements are surmounted, issues of national pride and saving face have continued to be a genuine drag on the partnership.

The experience during the previous Roh administration is instructive. Despite considerable tension, including notable personal dislike between Bush and Roh, the alliance grew stronger. Washington negotiated the moving of U.S. troops away from the DMZ and the transfer of the historically significant Yongsan military base back to South Korea. The two countries agreed to transfer wartime operational control from U.S. Forces to the South Korean military. The alliance also made significant strides in practical cooperation, from counter-terrorism to peacekeeping. Korea's deployment to help the American war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq occurred at the height of bilateral animosity. Moreover, the two sides negotiated the KORUS FTA and laid the ground work for the visa waiver program announced during the recent summit. But because of slights, real and perceived (often due to political pandering to domestic constituencies), unprecedented progress on many issues never added up to transformation of the alliance into a more mature partnership.

Couples Counseling

For over a decade America and South Korea have shared a goal of verifiable North Korean denuclearization. The prospects of a true breakthrough occurring in the remaining months of the Bush administration appear dim. The next

president, Republican or Democrat, is likely to inherit a nuclear North Korea with possible links to global proliferation rings. If Washington's policy is shifting toward a more soft-line approach, South Korea will likely take the hard line, perhaps working closely with Japan. This would not be the best way to move forward because it highlights divergence between the American and the ROK-Japanese negotiating posture. Pyongyang has a history of manipulating diplomats and their negotiated agreements. Any sign of strategic incoherence will enable North Korea to further hinder negotiations.

For strong alliances, even very divergent positions need not spell disaster. But a convergence of views between Lee and Bush is no guarantee of harmony. The Bush and Lee administrations need to hammer out some very real issues on problems from trade to further military cooperation on issues like counter proliferation. The KORUS FTA faces a tough ratification battle even with the resolution of the beef issue, particularly given continued opposition from the American automobile manufacturers and growing anti-trade sentiment from U.S. voters and politicians. Meanwhile, the willingness of South Koreans to support the more robust use of their forces overseas is not guaranteed.

Coming to a more unified stand on North Korea would free up a lot of official energy to pursue the important issues that can make the difference between advancing a partnership and merely maintaining it. Failure of America to ratify KORUS, for example, (particularly if the Korean

APRIL 2008

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National Assembly does ratify) will have a tremendous psychological impact on the Korean people and their support for the alliance. Policymakers in both Seoul and Washington should start thinking proactively about how to deal with the “worst case” scenario in which KORUS sinks. This situation will require a robust public diplomacy campaign that champions progress in other areas, like the completion of the U.S.-ROK visa waiver program, and the return of U.S. bases to the Korean government.

It is time for both parties to start reading each other's signals better to ensure that the relationship stays as productive as possible. Korea is committed to supporting stability and democratic values and can partner with America on a global scale. U.S. policymakers need to read Seoul's poker face and understand that anxiety can return even with the new government in place. Limiting surprises and building consensus on tough issues is within reach, and just requires a little more diplomatic understanding and clear communication.

Whatever course the current administration follows, North Korea almost certainly will have nuclear weapons when the next Commander in Chief steps into the White House. President Lee needs the three U.S. presidential candidates to think about how they would build a common strategic approach to North Korea. Hopefully, the current administration will help Lee by starting a high-level dialogue on both how to pursue North Korean disarmament within the Six Party Talks and more importantly, how to approach North

Korea should disarmament fail. The strategic challenge of a nuclear North Korea is not hypothetical. It is here today, and it is past time for the main allied partners in the Six-Party Talks to come to terms with the nuclear reality in Northeast Asia. If America is not transparent with its closest allies about its negotiating strategy with North Korea, such strategic thinking will be impossible and progress on trade and visas will mean little. True alliance bliss comes from unwavering confidence between partners through good times and bad. Washington and Seoul have a chance now to put the relationship on such strong footing by taking the hardest issue head on.

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