



Obama-Park Summit: Building a Better Vision

By Ralph A. Cossa

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Lots of attention will be focused during ROK President Park Geun Hye's upcoming visit to Washington on the ability of our two nations to craft a joint strategy for dealing with North Korea, and it's important that we do so. But it's even more important that we develop a forward-thinking joint vision for the alliance relationship.

We already have a "Joint Vision Statement" upon which to build; it was crafted by President Obama and former ROK President Lee Myung-bak during Lee's visit to Washington in June 2009. Rather than reinvent that wheel, the two leaders need to build upon that vision statement (thus demonstrating continuity in our relationship) while addressing three key points: the future role of the alliance post-reunification; the respective ROK and US roles when it comes to both denuclearization and the broader issue of Korean Peninsula peace and stability; and the identification of mid-term goals that would (or at least should) be acceptable to Pyongyang in charting a future path.

The Role of the Alliance Post-Reunification

What is the long-term vision for the alliance? Is it there merely to deal with the North Korean threat or does it have a role in preserving and promoting regional stability that would remain and perhaps even grow in importance once the North Korea issue is "resolved"? Citing the important role of the alliance, both today and post-reunification, used to be a common element in joint ROK-US statements but has been missing in recent years.

A failure to articulate the alliance's post-reunification role has direct relevance to how one deals with North Korea today since Pyongyang has made no secret of its view that Washington's continued alliance with Seoul and the resultant continued presence of US forces in the ROK constitute "proof" that the US maintains a "hostile policy" toward the North. Removing US forces from the South and closing the US nuclear umbrella remain transparent North Korean goals. The two allies need to constantly remind Pyongyang that the future of the alliance is for the ROK and US alone to decide. It should not become a "bargaining chip" in either US or ROK negotiations with Pyongyang.

Defining Roles and Missions

The second item the two leaders need to tackle is an articulation and validation of Seoul's leading role in determining the Peninsula's future and the US commitment to this approach, despite the apparent necessity of Washington serving as a "lead negotiator" when it comes to the specific

topic of Korean Peninsula denuclearization. Today, Washington appears to be sending mixed messages; many Korean officials and experts believe Washington wants the Park administration to take the lead in denuclearization discussions; others (and most US officials I talk to) are not so sure. The two sides need to be clear about their desired division of labor when it comes to dealing with Pyongyang.

One of Pyongyang's long-standing and constantly demonstrated objectives is to marginalize or delegitimize the South. This led the Clinton and Kim Young-sam administrations, in 1996, to affirm "the fundamental principle that establishment of a stable, permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula is the task of the Korean people" and that "South and North Korea should take the lead in a renewed search for a permanent peace arrangement." Presidents Obama and Park need to reaffirm this pledge.

This does not negate a direct role for Washington in denuclearization and nonproliferation discussions with Pyongyang, however. To the contrary, it can help put such bilateral talks in the broader context of not just the Six-Party Talks but the future peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula as well. The ROK government – and the Korean people – would be less concerned about direct dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang if they were more assured that its focus was limited to nonproliferation and denuclearization issues and that broader issues – including US force structure or the future of the alliance – were not on the table.

On the other hand, for political as well as for security reasons, the ROK government cannot allow itself to be, or even appear to be, marginalized or too far removed from the center of discussions dealing with Korean Peninsula security. Pyongyang continues to insist on a bilateral peace accord between the US and North Korea. The two presidents need to make it clear that this is not going to happen.

North-South "Peaceful Coexistence"

The two leaders also need to identify a mid-term goal or approach that would not alienate Pyongyang but lay the groundwork for positive cooperation and eventual denuclearization. It's one thing to be firm in dealing with North Korea, as previous comments suggest we must. It's another to leave the North with no option other than capitulation. If you ask 10 North Korea-watchers a question regarding Pyongyang's motives or tactics, you are likely to get 12 different answers; we seldom agree (even with ourselves). But if you ask what is Pyongyang's overriding objective, you are likely to get the same answer: regime survival.

One of former ROK President Kim Dae-jung's major contributions to the North-South debate was his decision, through his "Sunshine Policy," to set reunification aside in

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return for an unspecified period of what amounts to peaceful coexistence (though that term was seldom if ever used). This de facto “two Koreas” solution was also implied in Lee Myung-bak’s “Grand Bargain” – his proposal to Pyongyang offering a comprehensive economic assistance package in return for denuclearization and constructive South-North dialogue – but his approach came across as too condescending and was soundly rejected by Pyongyang (which eagerly takes Seoul’s handouts but only when they are called something else).

A new Grand Bargain is needed today in the form of a “Mini-Marshall Plan” (an idea originally developed by Pacific Forum CSIS founder Adm. Joe Vasey (USN retired). Presidents Park and Obama need to develop a joint ROK-US package deal that offers eventual recognition and acceptance within the international community plus economic and developmental assistance in return for denuclearization and the North’s willingness to develop and adopt a South-North “peaceful coexistence” framework where both sides may still profess their long-term goal (with different interpretations) of reunification but officially recognize one another’s right to exist and independent sovereignty today. This would go to the heart of Pyongyang’s central concern about regime survival. The brutality of the North Korean regime makes this a bitter pill for some to swallow, but failing to deal with the North Korea that fate or history has dealt us is not going to move us closer to reaching our near- or long-term objectives.

The critical issue is timing. Normalization of relations between Pyongyang and either Washington or Seoul cannot and should not happen with a nuclear weapon-equipped DPRK. Both countries repeatedly assert that “under no circumstance are we going to allow North Korea to possess nuclear weapons,” but in practical terms, what does this mean? Since North Korea has already declared and demonstrated at least a rudimentary nuclear-weapon capability and no one is marching on Pyongyang, the international community writ large has de facto accepted this situation at least as a temporary condition. It might make more sense to state that North Korea’s nuclear status will never be accepted or formally recognized and that normalization of relations and the lifting of sanctions are contingent on denuclearization.

Getting (and Staying) in Sync

North Korea’s “divide and conquer” or “salami” tactics require a closely coordinated approach on the part of Washington and Seoul at a minimum and ideally among Tokyo, Beijing, and Moscow as well. While always getting the others (especially the Chinese) to agree may be a bridge too far, it is essential at a minimum that Washington and Seoul continue to see – and be seen as seeing – eye to eye. It’s up to the two presidents to set the tone. This would demonstrate to Pyongyang, and to the US and South Korean people, that close coordination and cooperation truly exists and is a top priority for both countries as we jointly build a 21st-century alliance relationship, today and post-reunification.

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