



U.S.-ROK Summit: Alleviating Anxiety

by Ralph A. Cossa

On the surface, U.S.-ROK relations have seldom seemed better. Last fall's contentious issues -- negotiations over revisions to the Status of Forces Agreement and over ROK missile development plans -- were settled amicably. The new Bush administration has firmly endorsed the ROK-U.S. alliance. ROK President Kim Dae-jung is expected to be the first Asian leader to visit Bush in Washington, on March 7. (Japanese Prime Minister Mori was invited to come a few days earlier but apparently can't make the trip.) In addition, the administration has pledged its support for President Kim's North-South reconciliation effort and promised to continue its own dialogue with Pyongyang.

But, if things are going so well, why does everyone in Seoul seem so nervous? The answer comes down to one word: uncertainty. Seoul is uncertain about Washington's true intentions regarding rapprochement with North Korea; it is uncertain about North Korean intentions and Pyongyang's willingness to give as well as to take; and it is far from certain if President Kim can develop, much less sustain, broad domestic political support for his policy of reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea (also known as the "Sunshine Policy"). There is also uncertainty as to when and if North Korean leader Kim Jong-il will come to the South and even greater uncertainty over Seoul's ability to successfully manage the visit.

U.S.-ROK Relations

I'm told that Seoul's primary goal for the Kim-Bush summit is a simple one: to alleviate anxiety. President Kim will seek -- and will no doubt receive -- President Bush's personal, unqualified endorsement for his Sunshine Policy. (Kim's recent joint communiqué with Russian President Vladimir Putin endorsing the ABM Treaty as a "cornerstone of strategic stability" should not seriously affect this endorsement, since it should be seen more as ROK naivety in repeating a stock phrase acceptable to the previous U.S. administration than an attempt to undercut an ally. Nonetheless, Kim will have to do some back-pedaling to atone for what appears to be a Russian "gotcha.") During the Bush-Kim summit, we should also expect to see a strong reaffirmation of America's defense commitment to the ROK and the need for continued military deterrence. The world's newest Nobel Peace laureate will also want Bush to wave some olive branches in Pyongyang's direction. Some acknowledgment of North Korea's bold steps toward reconciliation and reform will be sought, and could be forthcoming, albeit with necessary qualifiers.

One such qualifier which continues to make Seoul nervous is repeated reference to the need for North Korean reciprocity, which is being translated as "strict reciprocity" in Seoul. It would ease Seoul's concerns if administration officials spoke of asymmetrical or progressive reciprocity instead, to acknowledge that the U.S. and ROK have more room for maneuver than does Pyongyang.

On the other hand, it would not hurt President Kim, while praising progress to date, to lay out more clearly and publicly the specific steps he would like North Korea to take in order to demonstrate its commitment to the reconciliation process. Kim should also clearly lay out -- and President Bush should then endorse -- his specific objectives for Kim Jong-il's long-awaited visit to the South. This will put pressure on the North to move beyond symbolism and will help remove anxiety both in the U.S. and in the ROK about the meeting.

North-South Relations

Kim Jong-il has bragged to visitors that he watches ROK television and reads Southern newspapers. As a result, he must be fully aware of growing opposition to the Sunshine Policy, not because anyone thinks that engaging the North is bad, but because the process is increasingly being described as a one-way street. For example, last fall President Kim unilaterally released a large group of North Korean spies and prisoners of conscience. The North has yet to reciprocate, even though such a move would cost it little or nothing. This is symptomatic of the "all get, no give" North Korean approach largely exhibited in North-South exchanges to date.

Of greatest importance, North Korea needs to signal its willingness to enter into serious security discussions with the South aimed at reducing tensions through the development of military confidence building measures (CBMs). To date, Pyongyang has refused even to acknowledge Seoul as a legitimate dialogue partner on security issues (insisting that such talks be with Washington instead). At a minimum, Pyongyang should signal its willingness, without preconditions, to accept Kim Dae-jung's call for a resumption of Four-Party Talks (involving the U.S. and China along with the two Koreas). Included in the Four-Party Talks arrangement is an agreed upon but not yet activated working group to discuss Peninsula CBMs, which could provide the vehicle for direct North-South dialogue on security matters. A resumption of Four-Party Talks, last held in August 1999, would have the added benefit of compelling the Bush administration to focus on North Korea issues in a positive way. (The North's seemingly preferred way of getting Washington's attention -- by creating a crisis -- is likely to have far less positive results.)

ROK Domestic Challenges

The greatest immediate threat to President Kim's Sunshine Policy comes not from Pyongyang or Washington, however, but from Seoul. President Kim has failed to develop a bipartisan consensus for his policy approach toward the North and even U.S.-ROK relations are being drawn into partisan politics. For example, attempts by visiting U.S. congressmen and defense contractors to promote American weapons systems -- which is, after all, what they get paid to do -- and a brief reference by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell regarding Washington's hope that Seoul favorably consider the F-15E in choosing its next generation fighter aircraft (over Russian and French/European competitors) have been portrayed by opposition politicians and some media critics as "strong-armed American pressure" on Korea, amid ridiculous accusations that President Kim might trade an F-15 deal for an American endorsement of his policies -- even though such an endorsement has already been received and is in American interests.

From an admittedly biased U.S. perspective, selection of the F-15E also makes great sense, given requirements for interoperability and the need for absolutely reliable resupply in the event of hostilities on the Peninsula. Demands that the selection process be transparent are certainly reasonable. But to expect American politicians or contractors not to urge Koreans to "buy American" would be as unrealistic as it would be to expect Koreans not to promote their own interests.

More importantly in terms of the peace process, some opposition leaders, led by former President Kim Young-sam, have been demanding that North Korea issue an apology for its 1950 invasion and admit guilt for a variety of past sins before Kim Jong-il is allowed to come to Seoul. Their goal appears not so much aimed at aborting the visit as ensuring that President Kim gains little domestic credit for this significant accomplishment. When pressed, opposition leaders will acknowledge that any future ROK leader would have little option other than to continue Kim Dae-jung's outreach program. But scant effort has been made by either side to craft a bipartisan approach that would put the peace process first.

This is where President Kim needs to wave a few olive branches of his own. As one frustrated Korean put it, "President Kim has spent more time consulting with the Americans and Japanese on his North Korea policy than he has with the Korean people themselves." In order to alleviate anxiety, President Kim needs to exert as much effort mending fences at home as he does building bridges abroad, since the most successful of summits in Washington will still be for naught if domestic consensus cannot be achieved.

Ralph A. Cossa is President of the Pacific Forum CSIS.