



U.S.-Korea: Summit Aftermath

by Ralph A. Cossa

ROK President Kim Dae-jung's Washington summit meeting with U.S. President George W. Bush was not the unqualified success he had hoped for but did accomplish his primary objectives. As expected and desired, Bush endorsed President Kim's Sunshine Policy of reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea, praising Kim for his "vision" in beginning a dialogue with Pyongyang. Bush also reaffirmed the U.S.-ROK security relationship and the U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral dialogue process aimed at coordinating policies toward North Korea.

President Bush also referred to President Kim as a "realist;" a comment which should help the ROK leader deal with increasing domestic skepticism, not about engagement per se but about Kim's approach to the North, which critics say offers too much and receives too little in return. To Kim's discomfort, Bush publicly registered his own skepticism toward North Korea, especially when it comes to U.S. negotiations with the North on missiles and other arms control issues. While Korean officials and sympathetic media outlets tried to stress the positive aspects of the meeting, most U.S. pundits and wire services stressed Bush's skepticism and his focus on North Korea as a "threat."

Of course, the latter is hardly news. The Clinton administration, even as it promoted increased dialogue with Pyongyang, continued to view North Korea as a "state of concern" -- its politically-correct way of saying "rogue state" -- and the latest ROK Defense White Paper also (correctly) identifies North Korea as the South's primary threat. This is why the two presidents, like all their predecessors, stressed the need for the continued strong military deterrence provided by the U.S.-ROK alliance and U.S. military force presence in the ROK.

While Bush was hardly enthusiastic about future U.S.-North Korean relations, he did not throw quite as much cold water on the process as press coverage would indicate. Bush stated that "we're looking forward to at some point in the future having a dialogue with the North Koreans," even while noting that "any negotiations would require complete verification of the terms." In addition, his statement noting that "I do have some skepticism about the leader of North Korea," concluded with "but that's not going to preclude us from trying to achieve the common objective." As Secretary of State Colin Powell stated after the summit, "we'll be formulating our policies and in due course decide at what pace and when we engage, but there is no hurry."

Clearly, President Bush is not going to be rushing off to Pyongyang any time soon, as his predecessor seemed eager to do. But the negotiation process is not going to be abandoned either. One can hardly fault a new administration for wanting to get its new team in place and its overall policy review completed before proceeding. In fact, the less than smooth handling of Kim's visit

underscores the necessity of such an approach. Mixed signals were sent and efforts by "senior administration officials" to clarify apparent inconsistencies revealed that the new team needs both more practice and more reinforcements. While being the first Asian leader to visit scores some diplomatic points, the downsides of an early visit were also clearly apparent. All things considered, however, President Kim should have been generally pleased, even if not overjoyed, with the visit.

Nonetheless, Washington must be aware that, rightly or wrongly, its hardline approach toward missile talks with the DPRK feeds ROK suspicions that the U.S. wants (needs?) North Korea as a threat in order to justify its national missile defense (NMD) program. I personally believe this perception is wrong; prior to the August 1998 Taepo-dong missile launch, most NMD proponents could not have found Pyongyang on a map and, if North Korea disappeared tomorrow, their fervor would not be abated. But, such suspicions are growing and help feed the larger perception that the U.S. is somehow against the North-South peace process as well. A failure by Washington to deal effectively with the misperception could have a long-term negative impact on U.S.-ROK relations.

One can only hope that North Korea understands the requirement for any new administration to conduct a policy review before marching forward. If its "indefinite postponement" of North-South ministerial talks is related to the Kim-Bush summit -- and this is just one of numerous possible explanations, others being Pyongyang's concern over President Kim's desired deliverables at the next North-South summit or even concerns about Hyundai's inability to honor its Mt. Kumgang financial commitments -- this could prove counterproductive to the North. So too would be its following through on recent threats to abandon its missile moratorium or its Agreed Framework nuclear freeze. Meanwhile, since Pyongyang needs North-South cooperation more than Seoul, "call us when you're serious" seems the most appropriate response to this latest North Korean effort to disrupt the dialogue process.

Given some of the confusion associated with the Kim-Bush summit, it would also be useful for Washington to send a clearer signal of its own intentions. The upcoming visit of Japanese Prime Minister Mori to Washington provides a golden opportunity to provide some clarity. President Bush and Prime Minister Mori should use this largely symbolic meeting to underscore their mutual support for President Kim's North-South dialogue and reconciliation effort and for the trilateral coordination process. Each should also declare his nation's commitment to proceed, cautiously and with due reciprocity, with its own dialogue with Pyongyang.

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