



## **ROK-U.S.: Closing the Gap** by Ralph A. Cossa

Debates are raging among the security policy communities in the U.S. and Republic of Korea over North Korean motives and intentions and how best to deal with Pyongyang. There seems to be only one point upon which all agree: no solution to the current standoff is practical (perhaps even possible) unless Washington and Seoul are in lock-step with one another in dealing with an increasingly belligerent DPRK.

While the two sides may not be as far apart as many believe, significant policy and perception gaps clearly exist between the two allies which the North is busily exploiting. In order to close these gaps, it is important first to understand the fundamental differences between the two sides.

One high-level ROK official recently told me that the main difference was that "we both have a carrot and stick approach but Seoul chooses to emphasize the carrots while Washington seems to favor the sticks." Many South Koreans would agree with this description but I believe it widely misses the mark. While the U.S. has an image of speaking loudly while waving a big stick, this hardly applies in the case of North Korea. Even Washington's leading hawks are arguing for a peaceful, diplomatic solution.

In truth, the U.S. has for many years followed a "carrot or stick" approach: behave and you get carrots; misbehave and the sticks come out. The classic "carrot and stick" approach calls for the farmer to hold a carrot on a stick in front of a stubborn donkey, but just out of its reach, to get it to move in the right direction. Sunshine Policy critics observed that the ROK's stick was too short: the donkey was able to get the carrots without moving at all. What was needed was not necessarily a new policy - everyone supports engagement over war - but a longer stick. It remains to be seen how long a stick ROK President Roh Moo-hyun will employ in pursuing his "Policy of Peace and Prosperity."

In his inauguration address, Roh said he would "give priority to building trust and upholding reciprocity." It was the absence of reciprocity - the failure of the donkey to move - that caused concern (in the ROK as well as the U.S.) about the Sunshine Policy's implementation. An insistence on reciprocity will help close the policy and perception gap between Washington and Seoul.

Ironically, while the U.S. retains its "heavy on the sticks" image, the only country to either threaten or actually use force against North Korea in recent years is South Korea itself. On at least three occasions - during the June crab fishing season in 1999, 2001, and 2002 - shots were fired by ROK Navy patrol boats at intruding North Korean ships. In two instances, North

Korean sailors were killed; in the latest instance, several ROK sailors also died when their patrol ship was sunk. (Those who believe that the timing of that incident, within hours of the World Cup semi-final, was coincidental, should take note of the North's missile test within hours of President Roh's inauguration; another coincidence?)

The ROK's firm response to the North's aggressive behavior in 2002 did not result in North Korean attacks but in an apology. It is important to remember these precedents if the North again acts aggressively toward an unarmed U.S. reconnaissance aircraft (as it did recently) and the U.S. responds with force. This also compels me to ask an impolite question: Do South Koreans believe that fishing in disputed waters is a more serious act of aggression than the development of nuclear weapons?

To be fair, President Roh has taken a strong stand against the North's nuclear weapons program. He is on record stating that he "would not tolerate" a nuclear weapons-equipped North Korea. (The English language text of his inauguration remarks said that the North's nuclear development "can never be condoned," causing some to worry if this was a weakening of his position, but the Korean text reinforces his earlier "will not tolerate" stance.) In his inauguration address, President Roh said "Pyongyang must abandon nuclear development. If it renounces its nuclear development program, the international community will offer many things it wants." This is precisely the same as the U.S. stated position.

The main difference between the two sides is President Roh's statement that a preemptive attack on North Korea to prevent its development of nuclear weapons is "a serious issue, and at this moment I am against even consideration of such an option" and President Bush's assertion that all options remain open even though he seeks a diplomatic solution.

Let's accentuate the positive. Both Bush and Roh prefer and are actively seeking a diplomatic solution; neither sees the use of force as a viable option at this time. Both sides also agree that the ROK should have a major voice in any solution (since it is the people of South Korea who are literally under the gun during this standoff) and that the crisis impacts not only Washington and Seoul but the Peninsula's neighbors as well. They even agree that dialogue is the preferred solution and that a central aspect of this dialogue is direct talks between Washington and Pyongyang.

Why then can't we narrow the gap through a joint statement, issued by Secretary of State Colin Powell and ROK Foreign Minister Yoon Young Kwan, reaffirming that Washington and Seoul remain committed to a diplomatic solution, one that encompasses direct dialogue between

Washington and Pyongyang in a broader setting that ensures that Seoul's voice is also heard and that the concerns of Korea's neighbors are also taken into account? And, why shouldn't this communique also note that both sides are committed to a peaceful solution at this time while acknowledging that continued aggressive behavior on the part of Pyongyang could force both allies to jointly reassess this commitment?

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