



## **Bush-Roh: Closing the Gap** by Ralph A. Cossa

WASHINGTON, DC - The summit meeting between U.S. President George W. Bush and ROK President Roh Moo-Hyun was, by almost all accounts, a success. The main reason, according to the skeptics, was that expectations were very low. No major breakthroughs were achieved, they argue; "success" merely meant there were no major gaffes (along the lines that caused Bush's first meeting with Roh's predecessor, Kim Dae-Jung, to be proclaimed a disaster). This was "confirmed" by the summit story's placement on page two of The Washington Post. "Bush Screws Up . . . Again" would have made page one; "Bush Gets It Right" (the actual headline was "President Sees Progress' on N. Korea") is page two news.

Even more interesting were the headlines accorded the story by The New York Times and The Washington Times (which ran the story on page one): "Bush and South Korean President Are Vague on North Korea Strategy" and "N. Korea Gets Stern Warning," respectively. It seems that progress, like beauty, remains in the eye of the beholder.

I think the meeting exceeded expectations and represents a major step forward in closing the real and perceived gaps in Washington's and Seoul's policies toward North Korea. It also addressed, head on, one of the key issues that has been causing strain between the two long-time allies: the growing perception in Seoul that Washington does not respect South Korean views and concerns and seems determined to rush into a confrontation with Pyongyang.

In their Joint Statement, President Bush conveyed his "deep respect" for South Korea's political and economic accomplishments, reiterated American support for the process of South-North reconciliation, and pledged to "consult closely" with President Roh on military basing issues, while reaffirming America's commitment to "a robust forward presence on the peninsula." The Statement also highlighted the "personal foundation of mutual trust and respect" that the two leaders had built between themselves.

Both leaders also "reiterated their strong commitment to work for the complete, verifiable and irreversible elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons program through peaceful means based on international cooperation." [emphasis added] There was a caveat, however. While expressing confidence that a peaceful solution could be achieved, the two leaders noted that "increased threats to peace and stability on the peninsula would require consideration of further steps." While some might consider this caveat "vague," it does represent a ROK acknowledgment that other options might have to be considered, based on continued North Korean escalatory actions; moves that "will only lead to its greater isolation and a more desperate situation in the North." This represents a significant narrowing of one of the major gaps in the U.S. and ROK positions on dealing with Pyongyang.

The two sides also reaffirmed their earlier individual pledges that they "will not tolerate nuclear weapons in North Korea." No "red lines" were proclaimed, but they did note "with serious concern" the North's statements about reprocessing and its "threat to demonstrate or transfer these weapons." Daring Pyongyang to cross lines in the sand may be counter-productive; identifying "serious concerns" sends a useful signal.

The mutual recognition that the Republic of Korea and Japan are "essential for a successful and comprehensive settlement" also puts Pyongyang on further notice that there will be no separate deal with Washington. While additional U.S.-China-North Korea "talks about talks" may occur, no serious negotiations are likely without Seoul and Tokyo's direct involvement. This is as it should be!

The agreement by both sides to "work out plans to consolidate U.S. forces around key hubs and to relocate the Yongsan garrison at an early date" also represents a breakthrough of sorts, as does the shared view "that the relocation of U.S. bases north of the Han River should be pursued." The relocation should "[take] careful account of the political, economic and security situation on the peninsula and in Northeast Asia," however. In other words, start planning to do it, but don't be careless or irresponsible about how it's done.

This addresses the somewhat silly but nonetheless pervasive suspicion in South Korea that the U.S. is planning to immediately move its forces to the south of Seoul in order to move them out of harm's way. Once this "tripwire" is removed, the theory goes, Washington will then feel more comfortable about attacking North Korea. This ignores the fact that the real tripwire is the tens of billions of dollars of American direct foreign investment in South Korea and the tens of thousands of American businessman and tourists (not to mention military families) that are located within artillery range of North Korea, whose missiles could reach American forces regardless of where they are based in the ROK (or even in Japan, for that matter).

The reality is that the consolidation of U.S. forces in South Korea is long overdue and the plan to move out of Yongsan (in the middle of Seoul's most choice real estate) has been contemplated (if not demanded) for over a decade. Senior defense officials tell me that what the Pentagon wants is a plan outlining the consolidation approved and in place by the 50th anniversary of the alliance this October; a plan that will then be implemented, "taking careful account of the political, economic and security situation on the peninsula," over the next three to five years. Its aim is not to allow a free shot at North Korea, but to enhance the viability of the alliance, perhaps (both sides willing) for another 50 years.

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