



U.S.-ROK: Tough Times Ahead? by Ralph A. Cossa

Is the U.S.-ROK relationship in for some tough times? The answer is probably “yes,” but not because of the recent forced resignation of “pro-American” Foreign Minister Yoon Young-Kwan (whose wise council and steady, mature leadership will nonetheless be sorely missed).

Foreign Minister Yoon did not lose his job for being too supportive of Washington; he was compelled to submit his resignation because of inflammatory comments by outspoken subordinates in a society where a boss is held accountable for the actions of his employees – this is sometimes a hard concept for Americans to grasp, since all too frequently our leaders seem unaccountable even for their own actions.

Foreign Ministry officials, particularly those associated with maintaining the U.S.-ROK alliance, had become more open (and provocative) in complaining about the actions of “progressives” within the ROK National Security Council (led by Deputy National Security Advisor Lee Jong-seok), who they reportedly identified as “junior Kim Jong-ils” or “the Taliban.” The chief culprit, North America Division III Director Cho Hyun-dong, has been stripped of his position (and awaits reassignment within the Foreign Ministry) while his boss, North America Affairs Bureau Director-General Wi Sung-lac has been transferred to the National Security Council – where he will be under Lee Jong-Seok’s watchful eye – for “failure to rein in staff criticism” of President Roh.

President Roh saw the need to “strengthen discipline” within the ministry after Cho’s “absurd remarks” which represented “disobedience to the president.” Ever gracious, Minister Yoon accepted full responsibility for “failing to lead [his subordinates] properly” in his farewell address. He was replaced by the president’s advisor for foreign policy, Ban Ki-moon, a highly regarded career diplomat with close ties to the U.S., a signal that maintaining good relations with Washington remains a high priority.

There has been considerable debate within the Roh administration from the start, not so much over whether the alliance should be maintained (although a few of Roh’s more extreme supporters question even this) but more over the degree of responsiveness to Washington’s initiatives and requests. The debate over the decision to send additional ROK forces to Iraq was reportedly very heated. The final decision, to send a mix of 3,000 combat and noncombat forces seems to have pleased no one, with the conservatives arguing that a larger number of combat troops should have been sent and many of Roh’s core supporters insisting that no soldiers be sent at all.

While the Bush administration was clearly hoping for a larger combat contingent – Washington reportedly was seeking 5-10,000 combat troops – the decision must still be

seen as a “victory” for the alliance; ROK forces will comprise the third largest foreign military force in Iraq (after the U.S. and UK).

Despite the firing, President Roh has reaffirmed the alliance, noting that strong ties with Washington are “essential” in dealing with North Korea and that bilateral relations are “as firm as ever.” Even “Taliban” leader Lee Jong-seok tried to appear reassuring, noting that “although there are some concerns, there would be no (negative) change in the Korea-U.S. alliance and cooperation” as a result of Yoon’s firing.

If this is so, you might ask, then why do I think that the alliance may be in trouble? There are a number of reasons. First and foremost was the way in which the firing was announced. Insubordination (plus accusations of intelligence leaks) would have been sufficient cause. But presidential advisor Jeong Chang-yong, in announcing Yoon’s “resignation” went on to stress that “some Foreign Ministry officials neither swerved from the ‘dependent’ foreign policy paradigm of the past nor properly understood the basic concepts and direction of the participatory government’s new ‘independent’ foreign policy.” “Dependent” is an emotion-loaded phrase used to discredit those who appear too close to the U.S., an unnecessary addition that could only be aimed at Washington.

It would thus appear that, even as one set of advisors was sending signals that the alliance was and must remain strong, others were playing the anti-American card, perhaps signaling that the president, facing contentious parliamentary elections in April, may once again choose to play the “will not kowtow to Washington” game that he played so successfully in winning election in the first place.

Comments by Shin Ki-nam, an outspoken lawmaker of the de facto ruling Uri (Our Open) Party, lend additional credence to concerns about the alliance. In expressing his “regret” over Yoon’s resignation, Shin noted that “this whole incident is a disaster caused by senior officials of the Foreign Ministry’s North American Affairs Department who became the symbol for incompetence.” “*Because of these officials’ pro-American diplomatic activities,*” Shin continued, “we lost control over the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue and made the participatory government’s North Korea policy look like a retreat from the sunshine policy of [the Kim Dae-jung administration].”

By blaming current problems on “U.S. worshipers” – a favorite Shin invective – the Uri Party seems to be signaling its willingness to play an anti-American card in the upcoming elections. Meanwhile, Roh’s silence in the face of his Uri Party compatriot’s attacks against the alliance and its supporters has been deafening. Inappropriate comments notwithstanding, the beleaguered diplomats responsible for

maintaining the “essential” alliance have legitimate complaints about the ideological battles they must fight in order to implement Roh’s professed commitment to keep the alliance relationship strong.

It has been President Roh’s proclivity for sending mixed signals that has caused much of the foreign policy confusion in the ROK, and between Washington and Seoul, since his inauguration last Feb. For example, almost every time there is a joint (or trilateral, with Japan) statement laying out a firm position vis-à-vis North Korea, there will invariably be a contradictory statement from another senior spokesman (more often than not from the Unification Ministry) complaining about the lack of U.S. flexibility, notwithstanding the fact that Washington has thus far been considerably more understanding and accommodating to Seoul’s concerns than has Pyongyang (which would not even have allowed Seoul a seat at the six-party talks had President Bush not refused to yield on this issue). Meanwhile, as long as Pyongyang sees that its stubbornness still causes divisions between Washington and Seoul, it has little incentive to come back to the bargaining table.

It is encouraging to see President Roh insist that his subordinates follow his policy directions . . . but only if this is enforced evenly. If, instead, the president has merely decided to exploit the situation by replaying the anti-U.S. card to shore up his fragile political base, especially at a time when public opinion polls show a steady decline in South Koreans’ faith in either Washington or the alliance, then there will be serious trouble ahead.

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