



ROK Elections: Implications for ROK-U.S. and South-North Relations by Ralph A. Cossa

The South Korean political landscape has changed dramatically, and one must assume irreversibly, as a result of the April 15 National Assembly elections. The torch has indeed been passed to a new generation; that much is clear. What is less clear is what this means, both in the near and long term, for ROK-U.S. and South-North relations.

No immediate changes are expected, of course, as attention now rapidly shifts to the Constitutional Court, where the already slim prospects that it would uphold the impeachment of President Roh Moo-hyun, have become even slimmer. The April 15 vote (which handed the pro-Roh Uri Party a majority of seats in the National Assembly) is clearly seen as a vote of confidence in Roh and against those who sought to impeach him.

Presuming that President Roh returns to the Blue House, one would expect that he would quickly proclaim his continued faith in the ROK-U.S. alliance and his continued insistence that North Korea give up its nuclear weapons ambitions if it wants to normalize ties with the ROK (and the world in general). While the far left of center Democratic Labor Party – which, with 10 seats, now becomes the third largest party – has promised to introduce legislation to withdraw the 600 ROK soldiers currently in Iraq and not send the other 3,000 already approved for deployment, it is doubtful that this will occur, even though there will be many in the now majority Uri Party who would be sympathetic toward this cause. (In this regard, the fact that the somewhat left of center Uri gained an absolute majority is probably good news, since it would otherwise have had to lean further leftward to form a governing coalition with the DLP.)

While the Uri Party has been considerably more sympathetic toward, and tolerant of, North Korea than its conservative opponents, Pyongyang is likely to be disappointed if it expects (and if true to form, ultimately demands) rewards for its role in promoting the Uri victory. The North was more openly vocal about this election than at any time in the past and, in its Pyongyang-centric view of the world, no doubt now believes that the Roh government “owes” it for this support. But, when President Roh uses the term “reciprocity,” this is clearly not what he has in mind. While aid and economic development may be more forthcoming (and ROK threats to withhold such assistance if Pyongyang misbehaves may be seen in the North as even less credible), there are limits to how generous any ROK government can or will choose to be, short of some positive movement on the nuclear issue.

In short, in the near term there will likely be less change than many anticipate (or fear). The long-term impact is harder to assess.

For the first time in his troubled presidency, President Roh will have a mandate to lead, but it is not clear what direction he wants to go in the foreign policy arena (his domestic political and economic reform agenda is much clearer and of a higher priority). Ironically, many of the U.S. force structure changes and realignments being pushed by Washington seem to coincide with Roh’s and the Uri Party’s desires. But how we go about attaining this mutual goal of a reduced footprint (if not reduced presence) and enhanced leading role for the ROK in its own defense will be increasingly important. Seoul will have to be seen more and more as the driver of this train rather than the caboose being pulled along by Washington

Korean nationalism may also prove to be a double-edged sword. Koreans have long had a tendency to see insults from Washington where none was intended while overlooking intentional slights from Pyongyang. At what point will Pyongyang’s refusal to deal with Seoul as an equal on security issues run up against President Roh’s and the Uri Party’s insistence in a “leading role” in settling the crisis, a position that Washington has now wisely accepted and openly promotes?

Washington and Pyongyang may soon discover that they will both have to become more attentive to ROK sensitivities if they want to see future progress with a reinvigorated President Roh. While sensitivity is not a Washington hallmark, it may prove to be an even greater challenge for Pyongyang.

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