



U.S.-ROK Relations: Silencing the Loose Cannons

by Ralph A. Cossa

The U.S. presidential election finally is over! Now the hard part begins. No, I'm not talking about getting North Korea back to the negotiating table; that will come soon enough. Now that Pyongyang knows it has no choice but to deal with the Bush administration, it will find a way to resume the six-party talks, after squeezing out as many concessions and rewards as it can manage.

I'm talking about the more important task of repairing damaged U.S.-ROK relations, which have deteriorated significantly during President Bush's first term in office. Many in the ROK (and elsewhere) were hoping for a quick fix; a "regime change" in Washington. Now that it is apparent that this is not going to happen, both Washington and Seoul need to look at the root causes of the current tensions and find ways to repair damaged ties . . . or at least stop making things worse.

The first steps must come from the top. Presidents Bush and Roh will be meeting at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting later this month in Santiago, Chile. The two should issue a joint statement reaffirming the centrality of the ROK-U.S. alliance for security on and beyond the Korean Peninsula both today and long into the future. They also need to express their joint determination to achieve a peaceful solution to the current North Korea-induced nuclear crisis, jointly calling on Pyongyang to stop stalling, to come back to the negotiating table, and to positively respond to the "constructive offer" that Washington put on the table at the last six-party meeting, in Beijing in June.

Then, and most importantly, both presidents need to ensure that their subordinates reinforce rather than undermine this message. Continued calls by senior ROK officials for "both sides" – and worse yet, for Washington alone – to "show more flexibility" are a clear invitation to Pyongyang to stall in hopes of Washington being pressured to further sweeten its offer. Such actions also raise serious questions in Washington as to Seoul's reliability and true intentions. Anti-Americanism has long been a problem in Korea. Now we see signs of anti-Koreanism in the U.S., as mutual distrust seems to be growing. This disturbing trend makes the twin goals of Korean Peninsula denuclearization and ROK-U.S. alliance maintenance and reinvigoration all the more difficult.

There has been an unfortunate tendency in the ROK to demonize President Bush; to see him as the source of all problems and the major impediment to a negotiated settlement on the Peninsula. Campaign politics in the U.S. reinforced this image. But the time has come for a more objective assessment. True, President Bush handled former President Kim Dae-jung's 2001 visit to Washington poorly and the

Pentagon has often been heavy-handed in pursuing its force realignment goals. But, President Bush and President Roh have established a good working relationship and Washington has clearly taken Seoul's concerns into account both in the Future of the Alliance Talks and in its negotiations with North Korea; in the latter case agreeing to the need for security assurances and vowing not to invade the North while working for a peaceful resolution.

While many of us would agree that it took the Bush administration far too long to put a proposal on the table, it did so in June, largely at the urging of President Roh (and Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi). A joint statement by the two presidents at the APEC meeting – or, better yet, a broader statement endorsed by their Japanese, Chinese, and Russian counterparts as well – would help put needed pressure on Pyongyang to finally sit down and talk seriously. President Bush could help this effort by remembering that, in addition to being Commander-in-Chief, he is also "Diplomat-in-Chief." While the president's role model, Ronald Reagan, took great delight in referring to the Soviet Union as "the evil empire," he was careful not to personally insult the leaders with whom he had to negotiate.

As an aside, President Bush also needs to make a public point of thanking President Roh for his courageous decision to send ROK troops to Iraq – his failure to include Seoul among the major Iraq contributors in two recent speeches was inexcusable.

As alluded to above, one major source of tension between Washington and Seoul has been the mixed messages emanating from both capitals. Both presidents need to take action to silence their respective loose cannons. Continued personal attacks against North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, while no doubt accurate and earned, send a clear (but I presume unintended) message to Seoul that Washington is not serious about negotiations. I am not concerned about hurting the feelings of North Korea's leadership; I am concerned about the impact such actions have on promoting anti-American sentiment and suspicions in the South.

A recent case in point saw Secretary of State Colin Powell in Seoul explaining that the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) was not specifically aimed at North Korea per se, but at preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or radioactive materials. At the same time, one of his senior subordinates was observing a PSI exercise in Tokyo Bay, loudly proclaiming that this exercise was specifically intended to send North Korea a message. This same official last year gave a speech, in Seoul, in which he mentioned Kim Jong-il, derogatorily, no less than 40 times. State Department officials who show disdain for the fine art of diplomacy should be working elsewhere!

Likewise, I recently appeared on a public panel in Seoul with a self-described “close friend and personal foreign policy advisor” to President Roh, who declared categorically that President Bush’s passing reference to Kim Jong-il as a “tyrant” during a campaign appearance in Wisconsin was a “deliberate attempt to undermine the six-party talks.” This same ministerial-level advisor had earlier repeated third-hand information strongly implying that the decision to reduce U.S. force levels in Korea was an emotional reaction by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to seeing a U.S. soldier being stoned in Seoul on CNN – Rumsfeld reportedly proclaiming angrily “get them out!” – rather than as a result of a careful, indeed painstaking, process of deliberation over the course of a full year. Such irresponsible statements send the wrong signal to the people of Korea and America and undermine President Roh’s (I believe genuine) efforts to shore up the alliance relationship.

What’s needed today is a true ROK-U.S. strategic dialogue. Senior officials and senior scholars on both sides must come together to craft a mutually agreed upon blueprint for restoring and reinvigorating the alliance relationship. This must include a public diplomacy effort aimed at countering rising distrust on both sides about the other’s intentions and future importance.

With President Bush’s victory comes an opportunity for a fresh start in rebuilding ROK-U.S. relations. This will require firm statements and firm leadership from both presidents. A clear, definitive statement of mutual support and resolve is needed along with a determination to stop the mixed signals that are stirring up anti-American sentiment in Korea and anti-Korean sentiment in the U.S. Both leaders can start by silencing their loose cannons!

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