



South Korea's ambitions By Brad Glosserman

Busan, South Korea – South Korea, long considered “a shrimp among whales” in Northeast Asia, senses opportunity. Diplomatic developments in the region hold out hope of a transformation of relations among states, and South Korean strategists see their nation as uniquely positioned to lead this process.

The Six-Party Talks to deal with North Korea's nuclear program are widely viewed as the incubator for a new regional security order. The current negotiations are an ad hoc affair, with diplomats meeting in Beijing at odd intervals. But the complexities of the talks and the range of issues and concerns subsumed in them will necessitate their institutionalization. Many participants and observers agree that the talks should morph into a permanent security forum for Northeast Asia, an unprecedented development.

In December, Malaysia will host the first East Asian Summit (EAS). While the EAS is being touted as a step forward in the effort to define East Asia as a coherent political entity, there are still far more questions than answers about this event. Who will attend? Who will lead this process? What is its ultimate objective? How will it fit into the existing structure of regional institutions, such as APEC, the ARF, and the ASEAN Plus Three?

In both cases, South Koreans argue their country is best suited to lead these efforts, and they see them as platforms to raise South Korea's international profile. In the Six-Party Talks, for example, many South Koreans feel that they, as an ally of the United States and a Korean nation, are the best mediators for those negotiations and are best positioned to bring the two key parties – the U.S. and North Korea – together.

When discussion turns to the EAS, Koreans point to friction between Japan and China, the two natural leaders of any regional program, and suggest that the competition between them will block substantive progress toward the goal of creating a coherent “East Asia.” South Koreans assert their country can serve as a neutral intermediary between those two rivals, and simultaneously dampen Southeast Asian concerns that any regional entity will be dominated by the two giants from Northeast Asia.

Yu Myung-hwan, ROK vice minister of foreign affairs and trade, summed up the South Korean view in a keynote speech to an international conference here that preceded the APEC summit: “Korea is free from the burden of historical issues, and a bridge country between advanced and developing countries, thus able to suggest a direction of integration that can harmonize the interests of countries concerned in a balanced way.”

It will be interesting to see how that argument is received in Japan. Numerous Japanese have used similar language and logic to argue that their country is best suited to act as a bridge in the Asia Pacific, bringing the Americas and Asia together; the same case is made in the G-7, where Japanese representatives have long maintained that their country is the best interlocutor between the developed and developing worlds.

South Korea will use this week's APEC meeting in Busan to showcase its ability to lead the region. Producing a forward-looking agenda and leaders' statement are important, but the real test is seeing those commitments implemented. In other words, the real test of Korean leadership – or that of any country – is not in the period leading to a meeting, but in that which follows: real leaders continue to work for results even when the spotlight has dimmed. That is the proper measure of a country's commitment to any project.

In security affairs, Seoul can demonstrate leadership by helping dampen tension in the region. Playing up historical tensions with Japan is at odds with this ambition, both because it inflames passions within South Korea and because it encourages other countries to act in similar ways. Seoul should do more to solve problems, not exacerbate them. (Arguing that Japan “started” the dispute may be true, but it doesn't help solve the problem, which is what leaders are supposed to do.) Similarly, Seoul should be working harder to find the sources of tension in the region and dealing with them before they flare.

Most significantly, South Koreans will have to work harder to balance all relevant interests in the region. That means reaching out to North Korea, but also to the U.S., its ally, and Japan, another country with key interests in any settlement of regional security problems. Thus far, Seoul has found it easier to reach out to Pyongyang and argue on behalf of the North in multilateral forums than it has to make the case for Washington and Tokyo.

Such objectivity is a tall order. It is especially difficult given the supercharged political atmosphere in South Korea, where it is much easier to stand up for their brethren in the North than it is to make the case for the U.S. or Japan.

Neither is it clear that other countries in the region are prepared to cede a leading role to South Korea. Southeast Asian nations have insisted on a leading role for ASEAN in every Asian forum they join; they are unlikely to make an exception for South Korea just because it isn't a giant like Japan or China. Tokyo and Beijing are equally unlikely to step aside for Seoul, if for no other reason that each has long argued that it is the rightful leader within the region.

Koreans are to be commended for recognizing the opportunities inherent in East Asia's transition. Seizing them is another matter. The obstacles that South Korea faces are formidable, and the odds of success are long. A grand vision is essential to the realization of Korean ambitions, but they must be tempered by realistic expectations. Koreans may have to be satisfied with being a "balancer" in key regional relationships – between Japan and China, for example – rather than a leader. Yet even that is a considerable improvement from being "a shrimp among whales."

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