



Lee Myung-bak Victory: Good News All Around

by Ralph A. Cossa

The landslide victory of conservative Grand National Party (GNP) presidential candidate Lee Myung-bak is good news for the Republic of Korea, for the United States, for the ROK-U.S. alliance, and, if responded to wisely and appropriately, for the DPRK (Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea or North Korea) as well.

President-elect Lee has made it clear that he is committed to improving North-South relations but that progress along this front first requires Pyongyang to live up to its denuclearization promises. This is a positive message that reinforces both the flexibility and firmness contained in Washington's current approach toward Pyongyang. It brings Washington and Seoul closer together than they have been in several years, both in terms of dealing with the North and in terms of the alliance relationship itself.

While Lee and the GNP are more conservative than current President Roh Moo-hyun's "progressive" administration, they are not your father's conservatives. The more hardline conservative position, represented in the election by former GNP leader Lee Hoi-chang, scored poorly, finishing a distant third behind Lee Myung-bak and the United New Democratic Party's Chung Dong-young, Roh's former minister of reunification who was, in the eyes of many, overly conciliatory toward the North. It is hard to imagine Chung or Roh really playing hardball with the North, regardless of its transgressions – witness the continuation, if not expansion, of economic business as usual after the 2006 nuclear and missile tests and the expansive economic aid package promised during this year's North-South Summit with no nuclear strings attached.

By contrast, President-elect Lee has stated clearly that "the most important thing is for North Korea to get rid of its nuclear weapons," further noting that "full-fledged economic exchanges can start after North Korea dismantles its nuclear weapons." While President Roh played lip service to the concept of reciprocity, Lee Myung-bak seems more serious about expecting it, while remaining clearly committed to the positive aspects of North-South engagement that the South Korean people have come to expect and demand. Lee Hoi-chang, at the other extreme, seemed more comfortable with the John Bolton school of international diplomacy that sees confrontational politics and ultimate regime change in the North as the only viable option.

Make no mistake about it: had the Bush administration followed this more hardline path, had it not become more flexible in its own approach toward the North over the past year, it would have found itself almost as out of step with the new South Korean regime as it has been with the current one. I

say this because there will no doubt be some in Washington who will see a conservative victory as an opportunity to once again revert to the more confrontational (and largely ineffective) policies of the past; this would be a huge mistake.

Of course, Pyongyang may leave Washington and Seoul with no other option if it continues to drag its feet on making a complete declaration of its nuclear programs and holdings, including a credible explanation of its previous purchases of uranium enrichment equipment. While not specifically called for in the Feb. 13, 2007 agreement that is guiding the current denuclearization process, Washington also expects Pyongyang to come clean on any previous proliferation activities (or to at least better define its past and current relationship with Syria). Failure to do so would be an even bigger mistake, since it would be hard for any administration – in Washington, Seoul, Beijing, or elsewhere – to sustain the current "action for action" engagement approach toward the North absent Pyongyang's compliance with its own promises.

In the past, it has apparently proven difficult for Pyongyang to resist the temptation of playing Washington and Seoul against one another. After all, this is a game in which the North has excelled, surviving for years by playing Moscow and Beijing against each other before the Kremlin (at least temporarily) dropped out of the equation following the Soviet Union's collapse. During the period that Roh and Chung seemed more intent on being Pyongyang's defense attorney than Washington's close ally, there was little incentive for the North to fully cooperate. While Washington continued to promise a pot of gold at the end of the denuclearization rainbow, Seoul seemed willing to give up the gold without having to experience the rain. This is likely to change Feb. 25, 2008, when the new administration takes hold in Seoul.

Pyongyang is presented with several options at this point. It can revert to form and try to test this proposition, while still dragging its feet on the denuclearization process, thus forcing Lee Myung-bak (and the Bush administration) into a more hardline position. Or, it can produce a comprehensive list of its nuclear programs and holdings and lock in the denuclearization process and the firm, yet flexible and fair approach that Lee Myung-bak and the Bush administration current seem to prefer. One hopes Pyongyang makes the right choice.

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