

**U.S.-ROK relations: a Joint Vision – and concerns about commitment** by Brad Glosserman and Ralph Cossa

*Brad Glosserman ([brad@pacforum.org](mailto:brad@pacforum.org)) is executive director, and Ralph Cossa ([PacificForum@pacforum.org](mailto:PacificForum@pacforum.org)) is president of the Pacific Forum CSIS.*

After a decade in the wilderness, the return to power of South Korea's conservative Grand National Party brings with it an increased willingness both to partner with the United States and to participate more fully in shaping the regional (and global) security environment. The new vitality in the U.S.-ROK relationship was evident at the June 16 summit of Presidents Barack Obama and Lee Myung Bak, a meeting that produced a vision statement for the alliance that focused on the future and the challenges that they will tackle together. Ironically, that positive outlook was overshadowed by the document's mention of the U.S. extended deterrent, which dominated South Korean headlines. As a warning to North Korea, the reference makes some sense. But if, as some suggest, it was needed to assuage South Korean concerns about the U.S. commitment to the ROK's defense, then all is not as good with the alliance as many want to believe.

Despite all the talk of a post-Cold War world, the most dangerous threat to South Korea continues to be that posed by North Korea. Two nuclear weapons tests, numerous missile tests, and Pyongyang's mounting vitriol have alarmed the South Korean public. Despite numerous assurances to the contrary, there is the growing fear in the ROK that Washington will be too "flexible" or accommodating toward Pyongyang and will focus on managing the proliferation issue while "tolerating" the North's nuclear weapons program. Blame 15 years of a U.S. readiness to make deals with Pyongyang that all too often seemed to marginalize Seoul and, most recently, the abrupt about-face in the Six-Party Talks during the latter years of the Bush administration that raised concerns about suspected "secret handshakes" between Washington and Pyongyang.

South Koreans insist that it is "essential" that Washington clearly signal that it "will not tolerate" a nuclear North Korea and that it remains committed to denuclearization. They are hard-pressed, however, to identify ways in which this can be effectively expressed, absent the use of military force (which they would not endorse). The upcoming 2009 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) is one vehicle both for expressing U.S. intolerance and for underscoring extended deterrence, although the Pentagon must be careful not to elevate North Korea's nuclear status or imply acceptance of the DPRK as a "nuclear weapons state."

While Americans tend to interpret President Lee's public insistence that extended deterrence assurances be expressly included in the June 16 Joint Vision Statement as a "lack of

trust" in the alliance, in recent meetings Koreans argue its real intent was to provide reassurance to South Koreans while also sending a clear warning to North Korea underscoring the U.S. commitment to defense of the ROK.

The reference to extended deterrence in the Vision Statement isn't the end of the matter. Korean officials and security specialists that we talk to insist it's only the starting point; they want follow up to discuss strategy, structure, operational doctrine, and even nuclear targeting. That is easier said than done. The ROK bench isn't deep on these topics. The discussions are extremely sensitive politically and it is by no means clear if ROK society is prepared to address these issues at a meaningful level. Finally, it isn't clear how far the U.S. is prepared to go down this path. Nuclear issues are tightly held. Here too, consultations on the NPR could provide a starting point for more intense discussions in the future.

The most important discussions, however, are those that focus on Pyongyang. While the ROK government may pay lip service to support for any type of dialogue, including bilateral U.S.-North Korean talks, scholars and officials alike privately express grave concern about a bilateral dialogue, cautioning that "close coordination," while essential (and perceived as lacking during the final years of the Bush administration), is no substitute for being at the table. The domestic political cost to President Lee if the ROK was excluded from any denuclearization dialogue would be significant.

This fear reflects more than just lessons learned from the last 15 years of U.S.-ROK relations. Rather, it is born of the enduring belief that South Korea continues to be subject to forces beyond its control and an object, not a subject, of regional foreign policy. This is evident in comments about how a U.S.-PRC condominium might result in actions that adversely affect ROK national interests – some even openly refer to the Taft-Katsura treaty as a precedent when discussing Washington's relations with Beijing.

This mindset also contributes to the country's fixation on Japan. South Koreans constantly rate their status in terms of Washington's treatment of Japan, using Tokyo as a benchmark for Seoul. Seoul seeks equality with Japan on every level; this focus shapes cooperation bilaterally and trilaterally. This is especially important as the U.S. tries to close gaps in the global nonproliferation regime and restrict access to reprocessing and enrichment technology. Japan's possession of this technology, approved during a different era, drives Seoul to demand "equivalent treatment" today. Negotiations on the U.S.-ROK nuclear licensing agreement – which restricts South Korean access to this technology and expires in 2012 – will undoubtedly focus on this issue and are sure to be contentious.

Fortunately, despite the historical baggage in Seoul's relations with Tokyo, both recognize the need to work more

closely together on issues of shared concern and actual discussions. There is a slowly expanding network of bilateral dialogue mechanisms among analysts and policymakers. There is also growing enthusiasm for the ROK to embrace more fully trilateral cooperation and coordination with the U.S. and Japan to deal with a range of concerns and contingencies, including China's rise (but not in a manner that would be perceived by Beijing as a "containment" effort). These efforts should be nurtured. Historically, ROK policy makers have understood the need for and value of good relations with Japan. But, cooperative efforts are usually the first to go when there is the inevitable gaffe and relations between Seoul and Tokyo plunge. This temptation must be resisted.

Two other issues figure prominently on the U.S.-ROK agenda and both go to the heart of the credibility of the U.S. commitment to South Korea's defense. The first is the transfer of wartime operational control of South Korean forces from the U.S. to the ROK, a move that is scheduled to be complete by 2012. Many South Koreans believe this effort, approved by the previous ROK and U.S. administrations, was driven more by political than military considerations and represents – or will be interpreted by Pyongyang as – a lessening of the U.S. commitment to defend South Korea. Even those who understand the logic and have faith in the South's ability to take the lead in its own defense bemoan the lack of public debate and understanding of this issue in Korea. We would argue that it is more important that the move be understood and supported than for it to be completed on schedule. Decoupling OPCON transfer from the proposed dissolution of the Combined Forces Command (CFC) may help provide the reassurance that cynics are still demanding.

The final issue is the status of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS). Domestic political considerations make passage of KORUS this year a virtual impossibility for the U.S. Yet, failure to pass the agreement, or a demand to renegotiate it would be equally damaging to the Lee government as well as to the alliance. KORUS is not "just" a trade deal – and as the second largest trade agreement ever negotiated, it is quite a trade pact – but a vital tool in the broadening and deepening of the alliance. If ever there was a way to signal U.S. commitment to its relationship with South Korea, passing the KORUS would do the trick . . . and it would serve America's (and South Korea's) economic interests as well.