

## **Obama Visit to Seoul: Building a Better Vision**

by Ralph A. Cossa

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The “Joint Vision Statement” signed during South Korean President Lee Myung-bak’s visit to Washington in June 2009 has set the stage for what promises to be a highly successful visit to Seoul by President Barack Obama later this week. Rather than rest upon the laurels of this joint pledge to establish “a durable peace on the Peninsula, leading to peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy,” the two presidents should build upon this vision by addressing three key points that the June statement missed: the future role of the alliance post-reunification; the respective ROK and U.S. roles when it comes to both denuclearization and the broader issue of Korean Peninsula peace and stability; and the identification of mid-term goals that would (or at least should) be acceptable to Pyongyang in charting a future path.

While highly commendable as a vital first step in deepening and strengthening the bilateral relationship, the Joint Vision, as currently stated, is likely to reinforce rather than overcome or neutralize Pyongyang’s assertions of American and ROK “hostile policy” toward the North and make denuclearization and the accomplishment of other near- and long-term objectives more unlikely.

### **The Role of the Alliance Post-Reunification**

What is the long-term vision for the alliance? Is it there merely to deal with the North Korean threat or does it have a role in preserving and promoting regional stability that would remain and perhaps even grow in importance once the North Korea issue is “resolved”? Citing the important role of the alliance, both today and post-reunification, used to be a common element in joint ROK-U.S. statements but has been missing in recent years.

A failure to articulate the alliance’s post-reunification role has direct relevance to how one deals with North Korea today since Pyongyang has made no secret of its view that Washington’s continued alliance with Seoul and the resultant continued presence of U.S. forces in the ROK constitute “proof” that the U.S. maintains a “hostile policy” toward the North. Removing U.S. forces from the South and closing the U.S. nuclear umbrella remain transparent North Korean goals. The two allies need to constantly remind Pyongyang that the future of the alliance is for the ROK and U.S. alone to decide. It should not become a “bargaining chip” in either U.S. or ROK negotiations with Pyongyang.

## **Defining Roles and Missions**

The second thing missing is an articulation and validation of Seoul’s leading role in determining the Peninsula’s future and America’s commitment to this approach, despite the apparent necessity of Washington serving as a “lead negotiator” when it comes to the specific topic of Korean Peninsula denuclearization. One of Pyongyang’s long-standing and constantly demonstrated objectives is to marginalize or delegitimize the South. This led the Clinton and Kim Young-sam administrations, in 1996, to affirm “the fundamental principle that establishment of a stable, permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula is the task of the Korean people” and that “South and North Korea should take the lead in a renewed search for a permanent peace arrangement.” Presidents Obama and Lee need to reaffirm this pledge.

This does not negate a direct role for Washington in denuclearization and nonproliferation discussions with Pyongyang. To the contrary, it can help put such bilateral talks in the broader context of not just the Six-Party Talks but the future peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula as well. The ROK government – and the Korean people – would be less concerned about direct dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang if they were more assured that its focus was limited to nonproliferation and denuclearization issues and that broader issues – including U.S. force structure or the future of the alliance – were not on the table.

President Lee’s “Grand Bargain” – his proposal to Pyongyang offering a comprehensive economic assistance package in return for denuclearization and constructive South North dialogue – signaled that for political as well as for security reasons, the ROK government cannot allow itself to be, or even appear to be, marginalized or too far removed from the center of discussions dealing with Korean Peninsula security. Pyongyang clearly disagrees! It continues to insist on a bilateral peace accord between the U.S. and North Korea. The two presidents need to make it clear that this is not going to happen.

### **North-South “Peaceful Coexistence”**

The Joint Vision statement also failed to identify a mid-term goal or approach that would not alienate Pyongyang but lay the groundwork for positive cooperation and eventual denuclearization. It’s one thing to be firm in dealing with North Korea, as previous comments suggest we must. It’s another to leave the North with no option other than capitulation. If you ask 10 North Korea-watchers a question regarding Pyongyang’s motives or tactics, you are likely to get 12 different answers; we seldom agree (even with ourselves). But if you ask what is Pyongyang’s overriding objective, you are likely to get the same answer: regime survival. The efforts underway in North Korea to prepare the way for a second

transition of power from father to son underscore this point (and the unique nature of this regime, which provides an unprecedented melding of communism and nepotism).

One of former ROK President Kim Dae-jung's major contributions to the North-South debate was his decision, through his "Sunshine Policy," to set reunification aside in return for an unspecified period of what amounts to peaceful coexistence (though that term itself was seldom if ever used). This de facto "two Koreas" solution is implied in Lee Myung bak's "Grand Bargain" but his approach comes across as too condescending and has been soundly rejected by Pyongyang (which eagerly receives Seoul's handouts but only when they are called something else).

Nonetheless, President Lee's "Grand Bargain" can help form the basis of a joint ROK-U.S. package deal that offers eventual recognition and acceptance within the international community plus economic and developmental assistance in return for denuclearization and the North's willingness to develop and adopt a South-North "peaceful coexistence" framework where both sides may still profess their long-term goal (with different interpretations) of reunification but officially recognize one another's right to exist and independent sovereignty today. This would go to the heart of Pyongyang's central concern about regime survival. The brutality of the North Korean regime makes this a bitter pill for some to swallow, but failing to deal with the North Korea that fate or history has dealt us is not going to move us closer to reaching our near- or long-term objectives.

The critical issue is timing. Normalization of relations between Pyongyang and either Washington or Seoul cannot and should not happen with a nuclear weapons-equipped DPRK. Both countries repeatedly assert that "under no circumstance are we going to allow North Korea to possess nuclear weapons," but in practical terms, what does this mean? Since North Korea has already declared and demonstrated at least a rudimentary nuclear weapons capability and no one is marching on Pyongyang, the international community writ large has de facto accepted this situation at least as a temporary condition. It might make more sense to state that North Korea's nuclear status will never be accepted or formally recognized and that normalization of relations and the lifting of sanctions are contingent on denuclearization.

### **Getting (and Staying) in Sync**

North Korea's "divide and conquer" or "salami" tactics require a closely coordinated approach on the part of Washington and Seoul at a minimum and ideally among Tokyo, Beijing, and Moscow as well. While always getting the others (especially the Chinese) to agree may be a bridge too far, it is essential at a minimum that Washington and Seoul continue to see – and be seen as seeing – eye to eye. President Obama has appointed a Special Envoy for North Korea, Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, who continues to make the rounds in Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, and (occasionally) Moscow to build consensus on how best to deal with Pyongyang. The Lee government should consider identifying a similar seasoned veteran – former Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the U.S. Han Sung-joo comes immediately to mind – to be

his point person on Six-Party Talks deliberations, and the two should be making rounds to the other capitals together (even if Bosworth's next trip to Pyongyang is likely to be a solo affair).

This would demonstrate to Pyongyang, and to the South Korean people, that close coordination and cooperation truly exists and is a top priority for both countries as we jointly build a 21st-century alliance relationship, today and post reunification.