



New ROK President Kim Dae-jung: Can the Momentum be Maintained? by Ralph A. Cossa

I must admit that I was among those who greeted the news of long-time South Korean opposition leader Kim Dae-jung's selection last December as his nation's next president with a certain degree of apprehension. Today, following his recent (25 February) inauguration, things look considerably brighter. There's no doubt about it, during the two-plus month transition period, Kim Dae-jung was an outstanding president-elect. He demonstrated extraordinary instincts and did and said everything right.

Korea's business community has been pleasantly surprised with his even-handed constructive attitude while the international financial community seems convinced that Kim, after a shaky start, has come to embrace the IMF solution as Korea's best hope for long-term recovery from the current financial crisis. He also managed to stare down recalcitrant labor leaders who, unlike their business counterparts, seem more reluctant to admit their own share of responsibility for Korea's current economic plight.

Kim DJ's commitment to national healing was immediately in evidence when, shortly after the election, he publicly called on President Kim Young Sam to pardon his two predecessors, Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo. Chun was not only intent on keeping Kim DJ in check but until cooler heads (and U.S. intervention) prevailed, fully intended to have him eliminated.

As President-elect, Kim also expressed full support for the U.S.-ROK security alliance as central to Korea's long-term security, going as far as to endorse a continued military presence on the Peninsula even after reunification. He also highlighted the importance of improved relations with Korea's larger neighbors and demonstrated particular political courage in extending repeated olive branches toward Tokyo – despite some narrow minded actions and affronts by the Hashimoto government (especially the cancellation of the Japan-ROK fishing accord despite Kim's request for Tokyo to delay a decision until after his inauguration).

Kim also expressed full support both for the Four-Party Talks and for broader regional security dialogue among all the major Northeast Asian states. He appeared considerably more willing than any of his predecessors to demonstrate flexibility and even-handedness in dealing with North Korea, provided Pyongyang is willing to reciprocate.

The big question, of course, is whether or not Kim DJ will be able to maintain this momentum once the realities and responsibilities of day-to-day governance set in. Having underestimated Kim earlier, I am cautious about overestimating him now despite his very good start, given the

enormity of the task facing Korea's first democratically-elected opposition party leader.

One key question is whether Kim DJ will continue to focus on getting ahead or fallback to getting even. The temptation to hold Kim YS accountable for his past mismanagement will be great and would be seen by many as poetic justice, given the vengeance with which YS went after his predecessors. But this would be misplaced energy. YS has already been clearly labeled as Korea's most ineffective leader – the joke in Seoul is that YS's only major accomplishment has been the narrowing of the gap between South and North (by dragging the South down). True national healing requires forgiving YS his sins as well.

Kim must also continue to hang tough with his traditional allies in the labor unions. Last month, South Korean business leaders issued a remarkable mea culpa, acknowledging the major role they had played in causing Korea's current financial plight and pledging to fully support reform. While there is plenty of blame to go around, labor leaders have yet to acknowledge their own significant role in perpetuating policies that made Korean firms less and less competitive. They are still threatening to take to the streets if and when much needed labor reform is finally institutionalized. This attitude helps to delay the recovery essential to putting displaced Korean workers back to work.

There are tentative signs that Kim DJ's more accommodating views toward the North may bear some fruit, although we should be careful not to confuse the North's recent (welcome) change in tone with a change in position. Pyongyang will no doubt test Kim's sincerity regarding the U.S.-ROK alliance when the Four-Party Talks resume in March. Clear signals that the continued presence of U.S. forces is not negotiable will be required. (Likewise, Pyongyang is sure once again to test American willingness to pursue a separate peace with the North. Washington must be absolutely clear that it will not yield from its long-standing position that only direct North-South dialogue can achieve peace on the Peninsula.)

It will also take great political courage not to play to or exploit anti-Japanese sentiments among the Korean population and to work instead toward genuinely improved Japanese-Korean relations. Some bold initiatives are called for (but with enough pre-coordination to insure that they are not rebuffed by Tokyo). For example, an agreement by Kim DJ and Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto to submit their disputed claim over Tokdo/Takashima Island to the International Court of Justice for binding resolution would, in my view, help get this important bilateral relationship back on the right track.

Many have stated that Kim Dae-jung is the right man at the right time to lead the ROK out of its current difficulties and toward eventual peaceful reunification with the ROK. If

he is able to resist the temptations that sidetracked his predecessor and stick to the positions he has already laid out, he just may prove them right. He is certainly off to a good start.

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