



ROK-U.S. Relations: Revitalizing the Alliance

by Ralph A. Cossa

The Feb. 25 inauguration of Lee Myung-bak as the Republic of Korea's new president opens the door for a revitalization of the ROK-U.S. alliance, a relationship that has been severely tested and strained in recent years as a result of policy differences and more fundamental "vision" differences between Washington and Seoul. An increasingly pragmatic approach toward the Korean Peninsula on the part of Washington and the advent of a more conservative, pro-alliance government in Seoul makes improved relations more likely and perhaps even somewhat easier to achieve, but by no means assured. If the alliance relationship is to be truly revitalized, both sides need to take some decisive steps, sooner rather than later.

President-elect Lee has already said that he plans to place increased importance on alliance maintenance and that he understands the centrality of the alliance relationship to Korean Peninsula security. But what is missing, in both Seoul and Washington, has been a clear articulation of the continued rationale and vision for the alliance both today and after eventual North-South reconciliation or reunification. Such a vision existed, and was clearly articulated during the Kim Dae-jung and Clinton administrations, but has not really been spelled out since then.

The last time Presidents Roh Moo-hyun and George W. Bush held a summit meeting, they did not even issue a joint statement. The time before that, they issued a vague statement that focused more on multilateral cooperation than on the future relevance of the bilateral relationship. One would hope that President Lee, shortly after his election, would issue a broad vision statement about South Korea's desired future role in Asia and in the world and how the U.S.-ROK alliance fits into this vision.

Kim Dae-jung used to argue publicly and persuasively that South Korea had to maintain good relations simultaneously with its four giant neighbors – China, Japan, Russia, and the United States – and that the best, perhaps the only way, that this could be accomplished was through the continued viability of the ROK-U.S. alliance relationship, which provided Seoul with the necessary security assurances to deal with its other three more immediate neighbors. The U.S., in effect, was the "outside balancer" that made Northeast Asia harmony possible. This was true in the near term, when faced with uncertainty regarding North Korea's future direction and behavior; it would be equally, if not more true were North Korea to either disappear or become somehow incorporated into a greater Korean confederation or unified nation under the political, economic, and social system existing today in the South.

Does Lee Myung-bak see the future in similar terms? If so, a clear articulation of his vision is needed prior to any summit meeting with President Bush. This would then set the stage for a joint statement articulating a common vision for the alliance and its future role and relevance, one that would hopefully be quickly endorsed by U.S. presidential aspirants from both parties (all of whom have a strong record of supporting the alliance relationship).

President-elect Lee appears to have already reconsidered his earlier plan to dismantle the Unification Ministry and incorporate it into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This is both regrettable and fully understandable, for political (as opposed to geopolitical) reasons. But it was not the existence of the Unification Ministry that caused so many problems over the past five years, it was the tendency of its various ministers to continually make statements that undercut the Foreign Ministry's many attempts to speak with one voice with Washington in dealing with North Korea.

In fairness, the Bush administration had an equally difficult time speaking with one voice on Korea during its first four years, as the Vice President's office continually undercut the State Department's efforts to reach accommodation with North Korea. Fortunately, President Bush has exercised long-overdue leadership in placing his faith and support behind Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her top North Korea negotiator, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill. One of President Lee's most important early tasks will be to ensure that his foreign and unification ministers speak from the same page, one that he (and hopefully Washington) will actively support.

President-elect Lee has already said all the right things: that his government will remain committed to North-South engagement – indeed, he has even pledged to raise the North's GDP six-fold (to \$3,000) within ten years – but only if Pyongyang honors its denuclearization pledges. This dovetails nicely with Washington's stated position (the views of disgruntled neocons notwithstanding), which stresses the potential pot of gold that awaits the North at the end of the denuclearization rainbow. It is essential that this position not be undercut by the next unification minister, not just for the sake of U.S.-ROK relations but for the credibility of the Lee Myung-Bak administration.

There are of course many other contentious issues that must be addressed. Many Lee supporters want to revisit the decision to switch wartime operational control of ROK forces from the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command (led by a U.S. general) to South Korea by 2012. There is also a need for contingency planning (regardless of who is in charge) in the event of a North Korean collapse or rejection of the denuclearization pact. The two sides also need to craft a consistent policy regarding North Korean human rights issues

– Secretary Rice gets some credit here for silencing one of the loose cannons on this issue (although firing would have been the more appropriate response), when Human Rights envoy Jay Lefkowitz gave an unauthorized speech which undercut Assistant Secretary Hill's arguments.

Moving forward (or failing to do so) on the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement will also have implications for the health of the alliance. Here Lee has an easier task than does Bush, given the politicization of FTAs – it has been disappointing (but again not surprising) to see certain candidates arguing against an agreement that clearly serves U.S. economic, trade, and security interests, in order to appeal to certain domestic political constituencies.

All these issues will ultimately need to be addressed. But the essential first step is to craft a unified joint vision of how the alliance fits into Lee Myung-Bak's broader vision of where he wants to take Korea in the coming years. The sooner this is done, the sooner the revitalization process can begin.

Ralph A. Cossa (RACPacforum@cs.com) is president of the Pacific Forum CSIS.