



## The Crisis in Korea: Why is Washington Fiddling while Seoul Burns? By Joseph A.B. Winder

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What is the Bush administration thinking? Here we have a government in a major U.S. ally in Northeast Asia facing a raging crisis that was triggered by an action that its new and inexperienced government took under political pressure from the United States at the highest political level, and the Bush Administration's response is "this is your domestic political problem, you fix it!"

Now it's true the Korean government's agreement to resume all imports of U.S. beef is sensible, in both country's interest, and long overdue. It's also true that the scientific evidence all supports the U.S. beef industry's contention that beef imports from the United States pose absolutely no health hazard to Korean consumers. But these facts are beside the point. The current outpouring of frustration and fury that was triggered by the agreement on beef imports is no longer, if it ever was, about science. It is about feelings and emotions, and until these feelings and emotions are assuaged, the crisis will continue to escalate with potentially dangerous consequences for the overall U.S.-Korea Alliance and relationship.

It's understandable that U.S. officials would react to the public protests against the beef agreement with a sense of frustration. Attempts to explain the scientific evidence that buttresses the case in support of the agreement are swamped by a campaign of disinformation led by irresponsible reporting by the Korean media, particularly the TV stations. So, what else is new? Opposition politicians, sensing an opportunity to wound the new ROK president politically, are going for the jugular by ratcheting up demands and refusing to take "yes" for an answer to all attempts by President Lee to meet their concerns. Sounds just like politics as usual in Washington. Student activists are fanning the flames in an attempt to recreate the atmosphere that existed when their parents were students in the wake of the Kwangju massacre. This is how students everywhere act when given the chance.

The problem is that this is not just another case of public protests against a foreign government. The United States has enormous equities in its relationship with the Republic of Korea, and the longer these demonstrations and protests continue, the more risks these equities will be exposed to. Already there are signs of discontent that the U.S. military keeps adding hundreds of million of dollars to its estimates of the costs it expects the Korean government to pay for the relocation of its headquarters and troops away from the Seoul region. If the protestors add grievances over the U.S.-Korea

military relationship into the mix, a linchpin of the United States' Asian security posture could be threatened.

In the end, of course, responsibility for dealing with this crisis rests with the Korean government and people. But the Bush administration can and should help. The crisis would not exist if the United States had not pressed the Lee Myung-bak administration to accept an all-or-nothing deal to resume imports. It has a political and moral obligation to help President Lee defuse the crisis by addressing the Korean people's concerns over the beef agreement. Nothing short of this will do. What is needed here is a cooling off period so that emotions can be defused and concerns addressed in a straightforward and sensible manner.

Renegotiation of the beef agreement is probably not an option. All trade agreements face opposition by powerful domestic political interests in all parties to the agreement, and it would set a terrible precedent if either government, having struck a deal, didn't stick by it. There are, however, other options to a "renegotiation." One option is to have "additional negotiations" that can clarify, augment, and, thus, "improve" the original text so that it meets the mutual needs and objectives of both sides. These negotiations can take place between governments or between the private interests involved with some sort of government "blessing" of the outcome.

Another option is to delay implementation of the agreement for a period of time, either indefinite or fixed. Since it is now clear that neither government is likely to move forward toward ratification of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS) this year, this option provides an opportunity to "kick the can down the road" for the next U.S. administration to deal with. Either option provides a cooling off period so that emotions can be defused and concerns addressed in a straightforward and sensible manner.

In either case, the Bush administration must be prepared to play a proactive and positive role in helping deal with the crisis. Under the first option, it must either help "broker" a deal between the two private sectors or bless the one that they work out on their own. Under the second option, it must be prepared to either agree jointly with the Korean government on a hiatus in the implementation process or acquiesce publicly in a unilateral decision by the Korean government to postpone implementation.

No one should be under any illusion that measures by the Bush administration to address the Korean public's concerns over the beef agreement will defuse the current crisis. There are many other factors in play here. But positive action by the Bush administration on the beef agreement is an essential step in the process of defusing the crisis. There is far too much at stake for Washington to just sit on the sidelines and watch events in Seoul play out without making an effort to play a constructive role in their resolution.