



Korea: Alliance at Risk?

by Ralph A. Cossa

Now that the ROK presidential elections are over, it's time for outgoing President Kim Dae-jung to take the necessary steps to ensure his proper legacy. No, I am not talking about his "Sunshine Policy" of engagement with North Korea. His bold, even if only partially successful, efforts at redefining South-North relations, which deservedly earned him the Nobel Peace Prize, have solidified his peacemaker legacy, regardless of periodic North Korean attempts to undermine the process.

But, as things stand right now, President Kim can also say, with considerably less pride, that he has overseen one of the greatest declines in ROK-U.S. relations since the two allies stood side-by-side in their fight to preserve the Republic a half-century ago. This is not to say that the alliance is seriously at risk today (it is not!), or that the decline is solely (or even primarily) President Kim's fault. But the alliance is clearly troubled and the growing downward momentum is clearly troubling. This is not a legacy Kim Dae-jung should want to leave behind.

Allowing anti-American sentiment to fester was a convenient and, as it turns out, successful tactic during the presidential elections. It no doubt served the interests and ambitions of the ruling party's candidate, now President-elect Roh Moo-hyun. But, as President Kim himself so eloquently argued in the past, the ROK-U.S. alliance remains vital to Seoul's security and to regional stability in general; its current deterioration must be reversed.

President Kim can start by spelling out once again to the Korean people why the alliance is so important, both today and in the future. He can also help defuse the lingering animosity caused by the tragic military training accident (in which two young girls were killed) by advising the public (as he and his administration should have done at the time) that the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) was fair and appropriately applied, that similar SOFAs are being negotiated to protect ROK forces operating overseas (East Timor, Afghanistan), and that, had the driver of the vehicle during the military training exercise been South Korean, he too would have been tried in a (ROK) military court and not turned over to civilian authorities. American apologies, from President Bush on down to the vehicle driver, should be acknowledged and accepted.

President-elect Roh also needs to make the quick transition from domestic politician to international leader and spell out his support for the alliance. North Korea's nuclear weapons program threatens the people of South Korea much more so than the United States. This may add to the ROK's incentive for a peaceful solution, but it should not cause Koreans to bury their heads in the sand and talk about U.S.-DPRK tensions as if the ROK was an innocent bystander or disinterested third party. Roh should

forcefully repeat the demand, initially proclaimed by all the presidential candidates, that North Korea end its nuclear weapons program and come into full compliance with all its international obligations, including the 1992 Joint North-South Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

Calling for dialogue is fine, but entering into new negotiations with North Korea while it remains in breach of all its earlier negotiated agreements sends Pyongyang the wrong signal. It is time for President-elect Roh to carefully assess what kind of signals he has been sending and wants to send to the North. If the North continues to believe it can get without giving, the new ROK leader will end up as frustrated as the one he is about to replace, especially when negotiating with an opposition parliament that is considerably less inclined to assist the North without some reciprocation.

This election should also serve as a wake-up call for Washington. For the second time in recent months, a ruling party candidate riding an anti-American bandwagon has won a democratic election in a nation formally aligned with the United States. The Korean and German experiences send a clear signal, reinforced in recent global opinion polls, that the Bush administration's premature fixation with Iraq and its overall hardline image when it comes to dealing with friends and potential adversaries alike, are not serving America's broader national security interests. Those most closely associated with this approach - Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld most readily come to mind, along with selected members of the U.S. Congress (they, and you, know who they are) - might want to reflect on its consequences.

I happen to believe that the current diplomatic approach followed by Washington vis-a-vis Pyongyang, including its insistence that North Korea immediately announce a halt to its illegal nuclear weapons programs as a prerequisite to serious negotiations, is the right one. It has been endorsed by key leaders world-wide, including President Kim and Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro at their trilateral summit meeting in Mexico. One can only hope that President-elect Roh will soon join this chorus, not only for the sake of the alliance but also because it serves the ROK's national security interests.

But Washington must also do a better job in explaining its objectives and in reaching out to President-elect Roh and those who are not convinced that Korea's future is inextricably linked to continued close security cooperation with Washington. An early visit to Seoul by a high-level U.S. emissary seems appropriate, followed by an invitation to the new president for a state visit shortly after his inauguration. In democracies, public opinion matters. If the people in either country fail to see its value or continued relevance, in the long run the alliance will not be able to survive.

In the near term, the alliance will survive, because it is as much in Seoul's interest as it is in Washington's that it do so. But, for it to once again thrive, serious remedial actions are required, both in Washington and in Seoul.

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