

Policy Forum 08-098: Challenges in Alliance Management between Washington and Seoul

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By Sun-won Park

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I. Introduction

Sun-won Park, Visiting Fellow at the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution, writes, "Policy coordination between Washington and Seoul is essential in order to

achieve the denuclearization of North Korea, diplomatic normalization between the U.S. and the DPRK, and the establishment of a peace arrangement through talks between the directly related parties. But the notion of policy coordination must not be used as a certain party's justification for sabotaging cooperation with the new U.S. plan for the Korean peninsula."

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II. Article by Sun-won Park

- "Challenges in Alliance Management between Washington and Seoul"

By Sun-won Park

When conservative candidate Lee Myung-bak won South Korea's presidential election in December 2007, the Bush administration expected that the management of the ROK-U.S. alliance would become much smoother. After President Lee lifted Korea's ban on U.S. beef imports he was afforded a one night stay at Camp David in mid-April, and the U.S. felt confirmed in its belief that bilateral relations were on track. But the lifting of the beef ban displeased many Koreans and caused massive candlelight protests in Seoul, and downtown streets were filled with demonstrators for more than a month. At present, the storm has subsided, but the approval rate for President Lee has dropped to around 25% for the last six months.

Though the pressure over beef has lifted, mass demonstrations will be sparked again if the right conditions are met as several factors in the Seoul-Washington relationship will soon go from bad to worse: there will soon be a mismatch of ideological tendencies between the Lee government and the incoming Obama administration, inter-Korean relations have deteriorated and the Six-Party Talks are stalled, economic performance is poor and the passage of the ROK-U.S. free trade agreement has been delayed. All of these issues, in one way or another, affect ROK-U.S. relations in a broad sense, and will be sources of challenges to the governments in Washington and Seoul in the years to come.

Issues and agendas between the U.S. and the ROK tend to easily become political problems in Seoul, which is required to consider different political forces in Korea and to allow public discussion of issues such as North Korea policy and the evolution of the ROK-U.S. bilateral alliance including the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) of Korean military forces to the Korean government and the free trade agreement. The U.S. government normally does not have to submit its plans on Korea issues to public debate; because it does not face this difficulty, sometimes it doesn't appreciate the steps that Seoul must take to formulate and implement policy.

Korea's wide political spectrum and different expectations of the U.S.-ROK alliance

Currently, there are three major ideological groups with interest and influence on the Korea-U.S. alliance: traditional conservatives, the New Right, and the liberals.

Korea's conservative wing expects the U.S. to play a constant role in defending Korean security, and does not agree with increasing military expenditures to the level the previous Roh Moo-hyun government pursued (8.7% annual growth of the defense budget). In their view, Korea should continue to rely on the U.S.'s security commitment in return for Seoul's expanding contribution to the U.S.'s international agenda. The conservatives also believe that the transfer of wartime OPCON from USFK to the Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff in April 2012 must be postponed; U.S. OPCON, they contend, is the most reliable tripwire to ensure American involvement in the event of an attack on

South Korea. This school prefers strict reciprocity and emphasizes using leverage like food and fertilizer assistance to correct the north's bad behavior. When North Korea does not comply with the direction in which the South tries to guide it, conservatives believe that a policy of malign neglect should be employed because North Korea could not survive without external assistance; some conservatives even argue that such a policy should be maintained until the end of Lee Myung-bak's term. The conservatives also have supported President Bush's policy toward North Korea, including some emphasis on human rights issues, and they do not prefer early talks on a peace arrangement formally ending the Korean War, believing that normalization talks and peace arrangement negotiations only serve for the extension of the Kim Jong-il regime.

The Korean version of neo-cons, known as the New Right, contributed to the election of Lee Myung-bak last year, and carries strong political influence in the ROK's North Korea policy. This group believes that the U.S.-ROK alliance must work for the ending of the North Korean regime, and that USFK should exercise wartime OPCON until the reunification of the two Koreas. They believe that the collapse of North Korea is imminent and that the resultant regime change is a precondition for unification initiated by the south. To that end, they feel that sending balloons containing anti-Kim Jong-il leaflets and US\$1 notes across the border, as has recently irked the North Korean government, will be effective to shake up the leadership in Pyongyang. The New Right was opposed to President Bush's delisting North Korea from the state sponsors of terrorism list.

The liberal or moderate progressive group admits that the ROK-U.S. alliance, as one of the most successful alliances in the world, has contributed to South Korea's political development and economic growth, but it views the Bush administration's eight years in power as a misfortune to Seoul, and to Washington as well. They expect the new U.S. administration take a leadership role in de-constructing the Cold War structure which remains on the Korean peninsula, and welcome a plan to initiate full-pledged diplomacy with the goal of a nuclear weapon free-Korean peninsula and to negotiate diplomatic normalization to open a new chapter in Korean contemporary history. In order to accelerate the establishment of the peace arrangement in the Korean peninsula, and for the future of even more successful ROK-U.S. alliance, liberals hold that wartime OPCON needs to be transferred as scheduled (and indeed it is already too late). They perceive that Korean wartime OPCON is an essential condition for the ROK to be recognized as a party directly related to the 1950-1953 conflict with North Korea and therefore to be able to sign a peace arrangement formally ending the war.

None of the aforementioned groups intend to change their opinions, and that is the problem: there is a lack of healthy debate. Political competition and accusations, rather than rational debate, drive national security issues in the political agenda. Since its inauguration in February 2008, the Lee Myung-bak government has swung between the moderate conservatives and the New Right, not between moderate conservative and liberal ideas. The liberal voice has not been well taken so far, and therefore the opposition has had no choice but to express its views literally on the streets. If this happens, as it usually does, on an issue directly involving the state of the U.S.-ROK alliance, the relationship will be put to the test. At the same time, this would provide good timing for the Lee government to adjust its foreign policy toward the middle of the spectrum, which will lessen the cost of the existing policy and increase the security of Korea.

America's new North Korea policy and the adjustment of the ROK government

Because of the extremely close nature of the U.S.-ROK alliance, any American plan for national security has a direct effect on the security of the Korean peninsula, and will also affect Asia' security architecture and system of peace. The North Korea policy of the incoming Obama administration is the most critical independent variable in determining the landscape of the peace and prosperity in the Korean peninsula, as was demonstrated by the drastic turn of policy with the advent of the Bush

administration in 2001. The Korean people remember the whole process of the Agreed Framework in 1994, the Four Party Talks on the peace arrangement for the Korean peninsula in 1997-1998, the exchange of high level visits of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Deputy Marshal Jo Myung-rok between Washington and Pyongyang, and President Clinton's aborted visit to Pyongyang in 2000.

The majority of the Korean public hopes for a historical development that will lead to the abolishment of the Cold War order and enable real peace. For the sake of advancing peace on the Korean peninsula, direct talks between the U.S. and North Korea are absolutely imperative and as long as communication channels between Seoul and Washington remain intact, the Lee government has no reason to oppose them. In fact, President Lee expressed this view in public interviews during his visit to Washington D.C. in November. As such, the ROK government began to give signals that its policy toward the north is to adjust to the incoming U.S. administration. President Lee should retain this attitude of flexibility over the coming months, rather than relying again upon the New Right's position.

Policy coordination between Washington and Seoul is essential in order to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea, diplomatic normalization between the U.S. and the DPRK, and the establishment of a peace arrangement through talks between the directly related parties. But the notion of policy coordination must not be used as a certain party's justification for sabotaging cooperation with the new U.S. plan for the Korean peninsula. Likewise, if the new U.S. president considers the entire South Korean political spectrum and coordinates with Seoul as he reviews and sets his policy toward the Korean peninsula, then the well-informed ROK government would support it, and there will be no frictions between Washington and Seoul. U.S. foreign policy will not become a source of internal conflict among the Korean public.

ROK-U.S. alliance management and the transfer of the wartime OPCON

With new administrations in each capital, South Korea and the United States need to renegotiate the existing plan for the ongoing realignment of their bilateral alliance. The Bush and Roh administrations have already established the groundwork by completing three important joint studies: the Joint Vision Study (JVS) for the future alliance before and after Korean unification; the Comprehensive Security Assessment (CSA) for the coming decades around the Korean peninsula and the region; and the Command Relations Study (CRS) on the transfer of the wartime OPCON. In principle, the conclusions of the each study could be updated or even revised, and the CRS stipulates that after having joint exercises for next three years, at the final stage in 2012 both sides will make a decision on whether to reschedule the transfer of wartime OPCON.

Compared with the first two studies on strategic vision, the CRS is concerned with an action plan and incorporates detailed actions with a specific time line, namely that the transfer of wartime OPCON to take place in April 2012, which happens to be the last year of the Lee Myung-bak government. The public's reaction to the rescheduling, and its coincidence with a politically sensitive period, is hard to predict precisely, even though it is safe to say that the conservatives hope to delay the transfer, and that the progressives think the existing schedule is already sufficiently late. Pushing the timeline a year later or so is not a big problem in a practical sense, but once both sides start to re-negotiate the time line at the initial period of the new Obama incumbency, it will remind Koreans of the unfortunate precedence that the Bush administration set when it declined to implement the Clinton administration's 1994 Agreed Framework with North Korea and the 2000 U.S.-DPRK Joint Communiqu. Even though the two sides are close allies, any re-negotiation following close on the heels of the inauguration of a new administration will give the Korean public an impression that the North Korean nuclear issue probably will not be resolved in a desirable way and that a peace arrangement on the Korean peninsula will never be realized. Readjustment of the

timeline will not focus on the technical necessities of military issues, but will lead the Korean public into a very severe debate about U.S. intentions.

In office together from 2003 until 2008, Presidents Bush and Roh shared no common ground in their world views. However, the ROK-U.S. alliance was strengthened because the U.S. administration very much wanted the Roh government's support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and for South Korea to take responsibility for its own defense by increasing defense expenditures and assuming responsibility for ten specific alliance missions that had been held by USFK for the last five decades. Now South Korean forces have been pulled out of Iraq and Afghanistan and the ten missions have been transferred to the ROK Army. New demands for the ROK to shoulder will decrease noticeably. In a sense, the next four years will be a test bed for the two countries. How will these two allies cooperate when the U.S. government decreases its demands on its ally? If both sides skillfully handle the issue of the KORUS FTA, and if the Lee Myung-bak government redirects its policies on alliance management and North Korea and in accordance with the new U.S. administration, Seoul can reserve its own ammunition to cope with the probable rapid change on the status quo of the Korean peninsula. Close consultation and cooperation, which do not occur naturally and will require effort on both sides, are the keys to successful alliance management during this transition.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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