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Assessment and Future Challenges of the U.S.-ROK Summit: From a Policy of Sanctions to a Policy of “Coevolution”

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Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S.-ROK alliance has gone through the greatest and most rapid changes in its fifty-six-year history. Yet the United States and South Korea have both failed to establish any strategic “Joint Vision” for the alliance in this new era. The Roh Moo-hyun administration dealt with many issues of alliance transformation. These included the relocation of U.S. military bases, the transfer of Wartime Operational Control (WOC) from the United States to South Korea, and efforts to facilitate the strategic flexibility of U.S. forces in Korea. None of these changes, however, were fully based on any shared strategic vision between the two countries; rather, the alterations were limited bottom-up approaches.

The Lee Myung-bak administration has managed to restore the previously damaged U.S.-ROK relations with the Bush administration in 2008. It also dealt with many issues affecting the future of the alliance. But an overall reenvisioning of the alliance only came about under the current Lee-Obama partnership.

The culmination of the June 2009 U.S.-ROK Summit was the joint statement released by the two presidents entitled “Joint Vision for the Alliance of the U.S. and the ROK.” This statement has been long overdue. It set out clearly the security problem confronting the two countries, and established their shared strategic interests. In a simple and concise way, the “Joint Vision” laid out the future direction of the alliance in a wide range of areas, includ-

ing not only military issues but also international values, the economy, the environment, and human rights. Fundamentally, the document recognized that the geographic range of the alliance has expanded globally, beyond both the Korean Peninsula and the Asia-Pacific region.

The future of the alliance is significant not just for the United States but also for South Korea. Korea’s diplomatic outlook can no longer be limited to the Peninsula, because its national power has matured enough to warrant a new diplomatic strategy in its approach to its region and the world. As part of this vision, the Lee administration has issued a new strategic motto, “Global Korea.” But the government still has a long way to go. It needs a more complete set of specific policies supported by a strong domestic consensus. The new vision for the U.S.-ROK alliance will help facilitate South Korea’s diplomatic leap forward.

At this critical time, the United States needs assistance from its allies, including South Korea. Currently, global leadership faces numerous transnational problems such as the unprecedented global economic crisis, an insurgency in Afghanistan that is at its highest levels since the U.S. invasion in 2001, and a weakened U.S. global leadership in need of revitalization. If these major challenges are to be met, the “Joint Vision” needs to be converted into specific policies.

The recent summit allowed a comprehensive discussion of both the new vision’s prin-

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ciples and the issues related to those principles, including the North Korean nuclear crisis, provisions for the global role of the alliance, and nonmilitary issues like the KORUS FTA (Korea-United States Free Trade Agreement). Naturally, given today’s circumstances, the North Korean nuclear program dominated the meetings. President Obama and President Lee have found considerable common ground in setting the strategic goals and policy direction that will be required to resolve the nuclear issue.

First, the two leaders again agreed on their strategic goal of complete, irreversible and verifiable dismantlement (CIVD) of the North Korea nuclear program. During the press conference that followed the meeting, President Obama expressed his flat-out rejection of North Korea’s demand to be recognized as a nuclear-weapon state. The two leaders also expressed a shared view on specific policy ideas to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea.

President Obama additionally stated that not only the United States and South Korea but also the international community will no longer repeat the pattern of rewarding North Korea’s belligerence. This alteration in the global response calls upon North Korea to change its behavior fundamentally.

Such complete and resolute agreement between Seoul and Washington on policy goals and plans to resolve the nuclear crisis is rather new. But although their united position was spurred on by North Korea’s unprecedentedly provocative actions, in general the two countries’ national interests were already in agreement.

President Obama set forth his bold diplomatic vision in his “World without Nuclear Weapons” speech on April 5th, 2009 in Prague

and his exhortations against “violent extremism” in his speech on June 4th in Cairo. Such a “world without nuclear weapons,” for Obama, is threatened by the “violent extremism” of North Korea. President Lee also seeks the complete dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear program, and he has actively participated in the sanction efforts. In pursuit of this goal he pushed for the effective implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1874 that imposes further sanctions, and at the same time proposed the idea of a Five-Party Talks that would not include North Korea.

The issue of sanctions presents several questions for the future, concerning not just the nuclear question but the future of North Korea itself. Whether the sanctions against North Korea bring it back to the negotiating table or fail to achieve the desired result, what will be the new starting point in resolving the nuclear issue? Is it possible that North Korea will not yield to this second set of sanctions and will continue its “military-first” politics as it tries to build a “strong and prosperous nation” against the background of its precarious leadership succession? In this regard, what policy alternatives will Seoul and Washington have?

The agreement and cooperation on the North Korean nuclear issue that was achieved at the summit in Washington is very well-timed and appropriate. But the process of further resolving the crisis with a degree of flexibility and caution will be a greater challenge. When President Obama stressed “the other path” available to North Korea if it gave up its nuclear program, he did not offer detailed roadmaps. His comments by themselves were not enough to motivate North Korea’s further behavior. If Washington and Seoul fail to as-

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sure North Korea of a clear and reliable discussion on the future of its regime and system, North Korea will maintain its own current path of “selling threats.”

The importance of asking how to approach North Korea’s nuclearization extends to neighboring countries too. Without a vision going beyond the existing sanctions, countries like China will stall on joining South Korea’s proposed Five-Party Talks. As it stands, the Five-Party Dialogue is even more difficult to implement than the currently deadlocked Six-Party Talks. In order to persuade China, whose main concern is to avoid alienating its ally North Korea, the talks will need to be able to set the stage for discussing ways to help a denuclearized North Korea reintegrate itself into the international community. If South Korea is to play an active role, it needs to be able to map out a new route to clarify the “other path.” Whatever is proposed should be based on a national consensus and an international consensus with the cooperating countries.

This process should be spearheaded by the Lee administration rather than by the Obama administration. The United States cannot be expected to make the North Korea problem its top priority ahead of the two major challenges it faces, the unprecedented global financial crisis and the complex war on terrorism.

What needs to be prepared alongside the sanctions is an “exit strategy.” Seoul must persuade Pyongyang to independently find a “path” toward denuclearization and prosperity by promoting new policies that engineer North Korean reform. Changes in neighboring countries that contribute to peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula in the twenty-first century should also parallel the

transformation of North Korea. Therefore beyond the existing policies, a third policy needs to be implemented, one of “coevolution” between North Korea and its neighbors.

The North Korean nuclear issue loomed large over the summit, so much so that the controversial question of troop deployment to Afghanistan did not attract as much attention as it might have. But the Afghanistan situation and its implications for the U.S.-ROK alliance should not be taken lightly. The alliance in the twenty-first century will face many global challenges beyond the North Korean nuclear crisis. What the United States most wishes from the alliance is South Korea’s stronger global role. The recent summit did not call for any expansion of Korea’s overseas military role, but the two governments will have to cautiously come up with a way to cooperate on the two key global security issues of Iraq and Afghanistan that were mentioned in the “Joint Vision.” Such a plan can be achieved by carefully assessing the security situation between the North and South, public opinion and the political climate of South Korea and the United States, and the national interests of neighboring countries such as China. Korea and the United States have taken a relatively cautious approach, keeping in mind long-term cooperation plans and understanding each other’s point of view regarding the current situation in Afghanistan. The problem is that no one can foresee the kind of numerous and difficult global issues that will arise in the future.

As South Korea plays a role in solving global security challenges, one should not view Korea just as the junior partner of the United States. From Yemen to Somalia, Korea has been directly involved. Its global role is not a choice but a reality. Therefore, alliance strategies parallel to its global commitments

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should be further promoted. The United States and South Korea have recognized that focusing on international nongovernmental assistance is useful for the division of labor in the alliance with respect to the situation in Afghanistan. Korea can contribute to international peace by, first and foremost, actively participating in PRTs (Provincial Reconstruction Teams) in Afghanistan. The Lee administration should form a clear agreement with the Obama administration on how beneficial such efforts can be for the alliance, America’s national interests, and international peace.

Debates on the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance between and within the two countries are inevitable. But they are also needed. The acknowledgment of the difference of opinion over the KORUS FTA and the simultaneous efforts to seek cooperation during the summit meeting are welcome.

During the summit, President Obama expressed the wish to put together an action plan on the FTA issue. The fact that the two countries agreed to continue discussions on the FTA, given the context of the challenging ratification process still ahead, shows the strength of the alliance. This strength is particularly evident when one takes into consideration the high levels of unemployment in the United States and Obama’s presidential election platform, which was critical of the KORUS FTA. Korea should take a broader view. During this global economic crisis it should not slide toward protectionism; instead it should reenergize the world economy by serving as a link between the emerging East Asian economic network and the world’s largest economic power. The KORUS FTA should not be viewed as a means to maximize economic and strategic gains.

South Korea should be ready to hold rational, continuous, and genuine debates over its national interests on the North Korean nuclear program, the U.S.-ROK alliance, and the KORUS FTA, rather than being limited to ideological arguments between liberals and conservatives. The government should also pay attention to these debates and transform them into the foundation of long-term policies. How the situation will unfold in the future will depend on whether the Lee administration succeeds in forming a public consensus on its policies. This can be done through active communication with the people and with opposition parties.■