

WebMemo



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Mr. Lee Comes to Washington

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South Korean President Lee Myung-bak's April 15, 2008, trip to the U.S. is a valuable opportunity to affirm the strategic importance of the U.S.–South Korea bilateral partnership and repair the strains wrought by the previous South Korean administration's policies. Presidents Bush and Lee can be expected to develop a strong rapport during their summit meeting based on their conservative views toward free-market principles, Lee's affirmation of the U.S. military alliance as the bedrock for South Korean security, their pragmatic assessments of the North Korean regime, and the strong Christian beliefs that both share.

President Lee arrives in Washington strengthened by the landslide victory of conservative candidates in the April 9, 2008, legislative election, which gave his Grand National Party (GNP) a majority in the National Assembly. Lee will interpret the election as a popular mandate to implement his economic plans to improve South Korea's competitiveness and encourage foreign investment. Although the conservative vote was split among three squabbling factions, their differences on economic policies are few.

Despite North Korean brinksmanship to raise tensions, Lee should remain resolute in requiring conditionality, reciprocity, and transparency in Seoul's future engagement with Pyongyang. A rumored U.S.–North Korean agreement to resolve an impasse in the Six-Party Talks' nuclear negotiations will be viewed warily by the Lee administration because initial indications are that it again lowers the bar for North Korean compliance. How-

ever, Seoul will likely be reluctant to criticize the deal publicly.

More troubling for the visiting president will be Congress's pandering to election-year political constituencies about the Colombia free trade agreement. The Democrats' willingness to alter pre-existing fast-track rules, as well as the commitment made to the Bush Administration in May 2007, sends a protectionist signal and calls into question the reliability of U.S. negotiating commitments. The political posture of the House leadership does not bode well for the U.S.–Korea free trade agreement.

Election Mandate for Lee Myung-bak. The South Korean electorate again repudiated the progressive (liberal) opposition parties during the April 9, 2008, National Assembly election, as they had during the December presidential election and four previous legislative by-elections. The progressive parties weren't able to provide a policy alternative to Lee Myung-bak, and voters rejected the progressives' appeal to serve as a check on the new president. Voters saw conservative candidates as offering a more viable path to economic progress. The progressive camp will remain divided and exiled to the political wilderness for the near term as it struggles to find a viable message and charismatic leader.

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Conservative candidates collectively achieved an overwhelming victory, putting to rest the misperception that the presidential and legislative elections were not politically and economically philosophical decisions. For the first time in 20 years, the presidency and legislative majority are controlled by the same party. The Grand National Party won 153 seats, securing a majority in the 299-seat unicameral National Assembly.

The GNP victory was tempered, however, by initial expectations of winning 180 or more seats following Lee's landslide victory in the December presidential election. A series of early missteps by the Lee administration and bitter infighting among conservatives led to declining public support.

More significantly, the conservative votes were split among three parties. Lee's ability to implement his policies will depend on his ability to heal the rift within Korea's conservative movement. He narrowly defeated former GNP chairwoman Park Geun-hye in a hard-fought and bitter battle for the GNP nomination that underscored a rift between traditional conservatives and Lee's "pragmatic conservatives."

Relations between Lee and Park supporters deteriorated further because of a contentious battle over the selection of candidates for the legislative election. Many incumbent National Assembly members who supported Park either were not selected or resigned in protest and ran against the GNP as a coalition of independents named the "Pro-Park Geun-hye faction." Former GNP presidential candidate Lee Hoi-chang and his Liberty Forward Party provided a third conservative choice, winning 18 seats in the central Cheongchang Province.

Conservatives' Uncertain Path Ahead. Lee Myung-bak has a sufficient legislative majority to push his policies, but the dynamics among the conservative factions remain in flux and could even alter the final allocation of National Assembly seats. Some of the GNP's 153 victors support Park Geun-hye, a fact that, when combined with the 14 victors in the separate pro-Park faction, gives her significant influence. Park's supporters could either choose to depart the GNP and augment the independent coalition or have the conservative independents rejoin the party, thereby decreasing or increasing the GNP's 153 seats.

It remains to be seen whether Park Geun-hye and Lee Hoi-chang will support Lee Myung-bak's legislative initiatives—there are few policy differences—or will be obstructionist due to personal animosities. It is also unclear to what degree the president feels he needs to mend the rift in the conservative movement or whether he has enough seats to continue ignoring his two rivals.

Pyongyang's Temper Tantrum. After remaining quiet during the first month of Lee Myung-bak's administration, North Korea returned to its customary brinkmanship tactics in order to scare Seoul into abandoning its new requirements for reciprocity, conditionality, and transparency when engaging Pyongyang. North Korea typically creates a crisis to dissuade its opponents from taking decisive action, diverting attention away from a failure to fulfill its commitments, gaining negotiating leverage, or demanding benefits for returning to the *status quo ante*. By incrementally moving up the escalatory ladder, Pyongyang retains the initiative and controls both the terms and the pace of engagement.

During a one-week period, North Korea unleashed a coordinated series of actions to dissuade Seoul from imposing constraints on its hitherto unconditional provision of economic and humanitarian aid. Specifically, Pyongyang:

- **Expelled 11 South Korean officials from the Kaesong industrial zone on March 27.** Pyongyang blamed Seoul's linking the next phase of the project's expansion to North Korean denuclearization. However, North Korea did *not* kick out South Korean business representatives, signaling that it wants to maintain economic engagement while eliminating the new political constraints.
- **Launched short-range missiles.** On March 27, a North Korean naval ship launched three anti-ship missiles off its western coast. Although the launches may have been routine training activity during the annual winter training cycle—Pyongyang typically launches medium- and long-range missiles when it wants to send a political message—the timing was perceived as provocative.

- *Threatened to cut off inter-Korean engagement.* North Korean official media stated on March 29 that Pyongyang could cease all North–South dialogue and contacts.
- *Threatened military action.* Pyongyang warned on April 3 that it would take unspecified military countermeasures against South Korea, reducing it “to ashes” if Seoul initiated hostilities.
- *Accused Seoul of violating its territorial waters.* Pyongyang warned that “South Korea’s military should clearly bear in mind that an unexpected countermeasure will follow if they continue to push battleships into [our waters] and raise tensions”—a potential telegraphing of a naval clash in the West Sea.
- *Raised invective against the Lee administration.* North Korean propaganda agencies labeled Lee Myung-bak a “traitor” and a “sycophant toward the U.S.” who had brought about an “irrevocable catastrophic situation and [damaged] the peace and security of the peninsula.”
- *Warned of ceasing disablement of its nuclear facilities.* Pyongyang declared on March 28 that Washington’s “unreasonable demand” for information on its suspected uranium enrichment program threatened further progress in the Six-Party Talks’ nuclear negotiations.

President Lee’s infusion of backbone and intestinal fortitude into Seoul’s foreign policy is in marked contrast to the previous administration’s acquiescence to Pyongyang’s demands for the past 10 years. It is critical for President Lee to remain resolute, rejecting calls for unconditional, nonreciprocal conciliatory measures, thus setting the proper tone for the next five years of engagement.

Wily Fox or Wile E. Coyote? Given reports of deteriorating economic and food conditions in North Korea, the timing of the regime’s belligerent antics is not particularly auspicious. North Korea risks biting the hand that feeds it when its economic and food situations are deteriorating. Good Friends, a South Korean non-governmental organization (NGO), reported in early April that North Korea suspended food rations to Pyongyang residents for six months. Food prices in North Korea have also risen sharply.

This would be the longest halt in rationing for the capital city, which is usually the highest priority for food deliveries. If the reports are correct, they could indicate severe food shortages throughout the country. North Korea has relied on foreign humanitarian assistance ever since it suffered an estimated 1 million deaths from starvation and starvation-related diseases in the mid-1990s. The U.N. World Food Program has warned that floods last year ruined 25 percent of the harvest and left 6 million people in need.

International assistance has dwindled because of donor fatigue and Pyongyang’s 2005 eviction of NGOs due to their insistence on stringent monitoring requirements to prevent diversion of aid to the military. During the past two years, North Korea has relied on South Korea and China for approximately 500,000 tons of food each. Pyongyang has yet to make its annual request to Seoul, which would be more hesitant to respond following the regime’s threats.

What Should Be Done. The most important task for Presidents Lee and Bush will be to “remain on message” in highlighting the renewed sense of purpose for the bilateral U.S.–Korea partnership. Both sides should avoid public comments on contentious but distracting tactical issues, such as South Korean participation in Afghan military operations or cost-sharing ratios for the realignment of U.S. Forces Korea. Specifically, both sides should:

- *Underscore a willingness* to closely integrate policy toward North Korea and insist on strict verification requirements to ensure that Pyongyang fully complies with its requirement to provide a complete and correct data declaration.
- *Define a road map* for completing the second and third phases of the Six-Party Talks. The document should define the linkages between North Korea’s denuclearization steps and benefits that other countries are willing to provide along with a timetable for compliance.
- *Agree to the resumption* of trilateral policy coordination meetings among the U.S., South Korea, and Japan on mutual security issues.
- *Articulate the economic* and geostrategic benefits of the U.S.–South Korea free trade agreement

and the downside for U.S. businesses and workers if the accord is not ratified.

- *Announce U.S. intent* to raise South Korea's foreign military sales status to the equivalent of "NATO plus three."
- *Complete a memorandum of understanding* on South Korea's entry into the Visa Waiver Program.

Lee's short tenure in office will constrain the potential for a long list of deliverables during the summit meeting, but Lee's policy statements to date

reflect an intent to improve Seoul's relationships with the U.S. and Japan, allowing for greater policy integration and leverage over North Korea. Lee has set South Korea on the right policy path, undoing the damage wrought by five years of former President Roh Moo-hyun's administration. The U.S. should embrace and reciprocate this new South Korean outreach.

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