

Comparative Connections

A Quarterly E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations



U.S.-Korea Relations: Bill's Excellent Adventure

Victor Cha
CSIS Korea Chair/Adjunct Senior Fellow Pacific Council

The quarter saw a good deal of U.S.-Korea activity, largely the result of several trips by high-level U.S. officials to the region. While extended deterrence was a major topic of conversation between the allies, Washington and Seoul also coordinated policy on North Korea with some indication that groundwork for reengagement in nuclear negotiations may be in the offing. Former President Bill Clinton's surprise visit to the North was successful in achieving the return of detained U.S. journalists Laura Ling and Euna Lee.

Present and accounted for

No one could claim that the U.S. was not present in Asia this past quarter. A train of U.S. officials traveled to the region including newly appointed Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell, Coordinator for UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1874 sanctions Ambassador Phillip Goldberg, Deputy Secretary of State Jim Steinberg, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Campbell's visit drew praise from both pundit and policy circles in Asia for what many perceived as presentations of positive pro-alliance visions and a principled and strong U.S. stance on North Korea. Clinton's visit came on the occasion of the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Thailand, which she was determined not to miss given complaints from the region about past absences by U.S. officials. Deputy Secretary Steinberg's trip in late September was already the second in his tenure – highly unusual for such a senior-level official – a manifestation of his interest in managing Asia issues. If part of the challenge for U.S. policy in Asia is simply being “present,” it certainly met this mark.

An important development for the U.S.-ROK alliance during the quarter was substantive discussions on extended deterrence. Meetings in July as part of the Security Policy Initiative talks (SPI) held in Seoul followed up on an agreement struck between Presidents Lee Myung-bak and Barack Obama at the June 2009 summit reaffirming the U.S. nuclear umbrella. The key portion of the presidential joint communiqué read: “The Alliance is adapting to changes in the 21st Century security environment. We will maintain a robust defense posture, backed by allied capabilities which support both nations' security interests. The continuing commitment of extended deterrence, including the U.S. nuclear umbrella, reinforces this assurance.” Press reports stated that the two sides had agreed to devise detailed plans for reinforcing extended deterrence by 2012. This emphasis on credible deterrence speaks more to latent concerns in Seoul than it does to the strength of the guarantee. This extended nuclear deterrent commitment rarely needed to be explicitly restated during the Cold War when everyone knew it was solid and credible – in this regard, its restatement may reflect greater uncertainty rather than certainty in the light of North Korea's deliberate steps at becoming a nuclear weapons state. To put it

bluntly, these concerns stem from the calculation that the U.S. in fulfilling its nuclear umbrella commitment to its ally would simply not be willing to trade Honolulu for Seoul if a crisis evolved to the point of a nuclear exchange. Such fears are both natural and structural. They are structural in the sense that the end of the Cold War removed the broader imperative of embedding every regional conflict in the context of a larger superpower competition.

The U.S. has tried consistently to address any concerns about extended deterrence. Immediately after the North Korean nuclear test in 2006 and again in 2009, the Bush and Obama administrations dispatched high-level envoys to South Korea and Japan to make a strong show of alliance solidarity in the face of North Korean provocations. But the visits and the statements of assurance about the strength of the U.S. nuclear umbrella were intended more for a South Korea audience than they were for a North Korean one.

Such statements are undeniably important for extended deterrence. But the next question that planners and policymakers must deal with is what measures are necessary within the alliance to bolster or reinforce the extended deterrent commitment. As one former U.S. defense official once said at a public forum in Washington, how can we take an alliance, which was built for a Cold War-era conventional threat, and revise it to deal with a nuclear weapons state on the other side of the DMZ? Implementation of the presidential commitment to strengthen deterrence requires answers to some very difficult questions for both the ROK and the United States. Many of these questions are politically explosive and therefore not easily broached. For example, is deterrence made stronger through the reintroduction of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula? By increasing ROK capabilities? By an explicit agreement regarding the range of contingencies under which Seoul would consent to the use of nuclear weapons by the U.S. on North Korea (i.e., the Korean Peninsula)? Do such contingencies include nuclear use in response to biological or chemical attacks by the North or only in the event of nuclear attacks? Would such contingencies also include Seoul's consent to U.S. nuclear use on the peninsula in response to a North Korean nuclear, biological, or chemical attack on Japan?

Family reunions in August between the North and South and talk of a "grand bargain" on offer by the ROK administration raised some rumblings in Washington about U.S.-ROK policy coordination. Was Seoul starting to get ahead of its ally in relations with Pyongyang? What else was the Lee government considering in boosting inter-Korean relations? Was Lee becoming susceptible, as past ROK presidents had, to using the inter-Korean reconciliation to help boost domestic popularity? Many of these concerns were put aside in September when the Lee government made it clear to American interlocutors that the agreements reached by Chairwoman Hyun Jung-eun of Hyundai in her meetings with Kim Jong-il were not made on behalf of the government and did not represent the government's position. Moreover, the Lee government clarified that while it supports inter-Korean cooperation, there are clear principles by which it will enter into such cooperation. First, the ROK would not cooperate in big-ticket inter-Korean projects without true progress by the North in terms of denuclearization. Second, the ROK would continue inter-Korean tourism projects (Kumgang Mountain, Kaesong, and other future projects) on the condition that the DPRK addressed ROK human rights issues – i.e., family reunions and the return of prisoners of war. In addition, such projects would not recommence without agreements that ensured the safety of ROK and other citizens (stemming from the shooting of a South Korean woman by DPRK soldiers at Kumgang Mountain). Third, the ROK

government would provide unconditional humanitarian assistance to the North only in the form of food and medicine for children. This was arguably one of the clearest statements of principles for inter-Korean cooperation in recent memory, and one that helped to clear up any potential misunderstandings between Washington and Seoul.

A small relatively unnoticed event during the quarter was the resettlement of nine more DPRK refugees in the U.S. (they reportedly arrived in June, but the information was reported in July). This brings the total number of DPRK refugees in the U.S. to 91 since passage of the North Korean Human Rights Act in 2004. This resettlement program – started during the Bush administration – has quietly become one of the most significant and lasting developments in U.S. policy toward the DPRK since the end of the Korean War that has contributed tangibly to the improvement of the North Korean human condition.

Another interesting development related to changing views in the ROK of U.S. standing. A survey by Pew Research Center, a Washington-based think tank, indicated an improvement in America's image among Koreans: 78 percent of Koreans now regard the U.S. favorably. This compares sharply to 58 percent in 2007 and 70 percent last year. The natural inclination is to associate this shift with the "Obama effect." But some of this shift in Korean public opinion predates the new administration. Would it be heresy to suggest that part of the shift has to do with a quiet reassessment among Koreans about President Bush's legacy in Korea? The assessment of the man who was known widely and almost solely for his "axis of evil" designation of North Korea has undergone a change among many in the business community and policy experts in Seoul. These opinion makers understand that the KORUS free trade agreement (FTA), visa waiver program, Work, English, study program, NATO-plus-three status for Korea, and Yongsan base relocation were all achieved under Bush's watch. Indeed, the former president has already been invited twice to Seoul in 2009 to very receptive audiences.

Bill's excellent adventure

The media highlight of the quarter was the surprise visit of former President Bill Clinton to Pyongyang. Clinton was successful in securing the return of the two detained U.S. journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee, who had been held in North Korea since March. The U.S. initially offered to send former Vice President Al Gore, who was also co-founder of *Current TV* where the two women worked, but Pyongyang reportedly rejected the offer and demanded Clinton visit. U.S. officials also justified sending Clinton on the grounds that this was the personal request of the family members of Ling and Lee. Clinton's mission was humanitarian, but he reportedly stated his views and his interpretation of Obama's views of how to improve U.S.-DPRK relations, which apparently led to a statement by the North Koreans through their official news agency that he had brought a personal message from Obama. White House spokesman Robert Gibbs quickly issued a statement saying that the North Korean claim was incorrect. Clinton looked uncharacteristically somber-faced in pictures shown around the world of him with Kim Jong-il. The North Korean leader, on the other hand, looked downright giddy to be hosting the former president. He also looked to be in better physical health than earlier photos of him at the April meeting of the Supreme People's Assembly.

A return to Six-Party Talks?

While Kim hosted Bill Clinton, the North launched personal attacks on Secretary Clinton after she likened the leadership in Pyongyang to “small children and unruly teenagers and people who are demanding attention.” A DPRK Foreign Ministry statement called Clinton “by no means intelligent” and a “funny lady.” The North also claimed it had no interest in Six-Party Talks and that the process was effectively dead. As the DPRK Ambassador to the United Nations Sin Sonho said in July, “the Six-Party Talks are gone forever.”

In September, the DPRK stated to the UN that it had entered the final phases of uranium enrichment and was building more nuclear weapons with spent fuel rods extracted from its only operating plutonium-producing reactor. North Korea’s statements to the UN constitute an extraordinary admission of guilt after years of having denied such a program in violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework. The fact that Pyongyang chose to put such an admission of guilt in writing to the UNSC constitutes another step in its effort to be recognized as a nuclear weapon state. Few can continue to regard North Korean behavior as a bargaining ploy. Those who continue to do so are being ideological rather than empirical. The Obama administration takes such statements quite seriously and has not simply written them off as tactics.

The North’s claim during this quarter that Six-Party Talks are dead, on the other hand, does appear to be tactical. In the history of these multilateral talks, the North (and the media) has claimed the Six-Party Talks to have been dead at least two other times – in June 2005 after the talks had not convened for one year after the June 2004 round and again in December 2006, when the round after the North’s first nuclear test ended inconclusively. In both cases, the talks eventually did resume. The primary factor that is likely to bring the North back is the efficacy of the UNSCR 1874 sanctions. One early accomplishment the Obama administration can claim is that it has created the first UN-sanctioned counterproliferation regime against the DPRK. As one U.S. official recently noted, this sanctions regime has taken on a life of its own as UN member states are now routinely scrutinizing North Korean shipping and financial transactions for violations of Resolution 1874. The Bush administration had sanctions against the North, but the difference for Obama is that the current set is fully mandated by the UN. This makes the work of Stuart Levey and Phil Goldberg easier as they go to foreign capitals and bank regulators not with U.S.-only requests, but in the spirit of implementing the UN resolution. The other aspect of the sanctions regime that is new is the designation of North Korean individuals. Travel bans and a freeze on financial assets were placed on five North Koreans in July. This measure will not, of course, lead to a shutdown of DPRK proliferation activities. But the designation of individuals is certain to create concern among North Korean elite inside and outside Pyongyang that they may be next. So, it is these sanctions that are likely to bring the North back to talks.

The North’s claim that it is only interested in bilateral talks with the U.S. and not Six-Party Talks is also tactical. Pyongyang knows full well that a reconvening of Six-Party Talks in Beijing would be accompanied by lengthy bilateral negotiations between the U.S. and DPRK. Bilateral meetings – whether U.S.-DPRK, Russia-China, Japan-ROK – actually occupy the largest part of the schedule at Six-Party Talks after the opening plenary session. Indeed, it is in these coordinated sessions that much of the negotiation business gets done. Thus, North Korea demand for bilateral talks in lieu of Six-Party Talks is merely an expression of their own

disinterest in returning. In addition, it is an effort to try to shift the burden to the U.S. to extract concessions. A return to negotiations appears unclear at the end of this quarter, but there were reportedly scheduled track two discussions in the U.S. in October that North Koreans might attend. This has been the traditional means by which reengagement has come about. Whether anything materializes from such meetings is unclear. What is clear is that Obama administration has undertaken an intensive study of the negotiating record and history, and therefore is fully aware of these tactics by the North.

Chronology of U.S.-Korea Relations July-September*

July 2, 2009: North Korea test-fires four short-range *KN-01* surface-to-ship missiles, with a range of 120-160 km, from a base at Sinsang-ri north of Wonsan.

July 3, 2009: President Barack Obama says the U.S. is trying to “keep a door open” for North Korea to return to international nuclear disarmament talks, even as Washington pursues sanctions against the DPRK.

July 3, 2009: A CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll released says that Americans now consider the DPRK its biggest threat, above Iran, China, and Russia.

July 4, 2009: The DPRK test-fires seven missiles. Vice President Joseph Biden dismisses the latest series of missile launches as, “Some of it seems like almost attention-seeking behavior.”

July 6, 2009: U.S. State Department spokesman Ian Kelly states that the U.S. will not resume food aid to the DPRK unless there is a guarantee that the food will be distributed properly among North Koreans who need it.

July 6, 2009: Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan says his ministry will be in charge of persuading the U.S. to allow the ROK to pursue a broader commercial nuclear program including the “recycling” of spent fuel.

July 6, 2009: North Korean ship, *Kang Nam I*, which the U.S. Navy had been tracking because it was suspected of carrying illicit cargo, returns to Nampo without delivering any cargo.

July 7, 2009: President Obama says he doesn’t think a war “is imminent” with the DPRK. He also says, “I think they understand that they would be overwhelmed in a serious military conflict with the United States.”

July 7, 2009: ROK Defense Ministry official says the U.S. is open to talks on the possibility of South Korea developing ballistic missiles capable of striking all of North Korea.

* Prepared with assistance from David Shin Park

July 8, 2009: Grand National Party (GNP) lawmaker Choi Ku-sik who is spearheading the campaign for the ROK to obtain “programmatically consent” for reprocessing spent nuclear fuel, emphasizes that his motive has nothing to do with proliferation.

July 9, 2009: U.S. senators introduce a bill to impose new economic sanctions on the DPRK, re-designate the DPRK as a state sponsor of terrorism, and expand U.S. military cooperation with ROK and Japan.

July 10, 2009: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says she hopes the DPRK will free two jailed U.S. reporters. She said the two reporters had expressed “great remorse for the incident,” adding that “everyone is very sorry that it happened.”

July 11, 2009: *Voice of America* reports that nine more DPRK refugees arrived in the U.S. in June, bringing the total to 91 since passage of the North Korean Human Rights Act in 2004.

July 13, 2009: U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Kathleen Stephens says the nuclear agreement between the U.S. and South Korea should be changed based on the understanding that peaceful nuclear development is important to South Korea.

July 14, 2009: U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and the Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell says North Korea is strengthening ties with Burma and that Washington will watch all external support for Burma’s nuclear development, including those by Russia and the DPRK.

July 14, 2009: Commander of U.S. forces in Korea Gen. Walter Sharp says the U.S. has no immediate plans to allow South Korea to develop longer-range missiles to counter North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities.

July 14, 2009: The DPRK, at a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), harshly criticizes the U.S. nuclear threat on the Korean Peninsula, and defends its recent nuclear test.

July 15, 2009: Ah Ho-young, ROK deputy trade minister, reaffirms that ROK has no plan to renegotiate its free trade agreement (FTA) signed with the U.S.

July 16, 2009: U.N. Security Council panel imposes new sanctions on North Korea, naming five people and five companies subject to travel bans and a freeze on financial assets. U.S. officials express satisfaction with the list and China agrees to most recommendations.

July 18, 2009: Assistant Secretary Campbell says, “If North Korea is prepared to take serious and irreversible steps, the U.S., South Korea, Japan, China, and others will be able to put together a comprehensive package that would be attractive to North Korea.”

July 20, 2009: Assistant Secretary Campbell outlines a two-track strategy involving tougher sanctions but also negotiations if the DPRK is willing to give up its nuclear ambitions.

July 20, 2009: Secretary Clinton likens Pyongyang’s behavior to that of unruly children.

July 21, 2009: Secretary Clinton says “there is obviously a list of incentives and offers that could be made if the DPRK representatives evidence any willingness to take a different path than the one they are currently pursuing.”

July 22, 2009: Sen. John Kerry sponsors an amendment to the 2010 defense-authorization bill expressing a sense of the Senate that the Obama administration should conduct a review to determine whether the DPRK should be re-listed as a state sponsor of terrorism.

July 22, 2009: Secretary Clinton says the DPRK must obey a UN resolution on its international shipments or its vessels will “find no port” for commerce.

July 23, 2009: Ri Hung-sik, director general of the DPRK Foreign Ministry’s International Organization Bureau, dismisses a U.S.-proposed “comprehensive package” of political and economic incentives for Pyongyang as “nonsense.”

July 23, 2009: Secretary Clinton urges ASEAN Regional Forum members to keep pressure and enforce UN sanctions on the DPRK to end its nuclear program.

July 23, 2009: A DPRK Foreign Ministry official calls Secretary Clinton “by no means intelligent” and a “funny lady.” He says, “Sometimes she looks like a primary schoolgirl and sometimes a pensioner going shopping.”

July 25, 2009: DPRK Ambassador to the UN Sin Son-ho says that Pyongyang is “not against dialogue” with Washington. He also says “the Six-Party Talks are gone forever.”

July 26, 2009: DPRK media criticize annual joint U.S.-ROK *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* military exercises as “a military plan aimed at invading the North.”

July 27, 2009: A survey by Pew Research Center indicates that 78 percent of Koreans now regard the U.S. favorably. This compares sharply to 58 percent in 2007.

Aug. 3, 2009: The North Korea Sanctions Act of 2009 is submitted to the Congress. It calls on the Obama administration to “impose certain sanctions on North Korea as a result of the detonation by that country of a nuclear explosive device on May 25, 2009” under the Arms Export Control Act.

Aug. 4, 2009: Ex-U.S. President Bill Clinton visits Pyongyang. After talks and dinner with Kim Jong-il, he departs with two U.S. journalists, who had been arrested and sentenced for illicitly entering North Korea from China.

Aug. 5, 2009: President Obama reiterates that Bill Clinton’s trip to free the two female reporters was a private initiative and not a sign of easing international diplomatic pressure on the DPRK.

Aug. 9, 2009: National Security Adviser James Jones says that the U.S. will deal with the DPRK through Six-Party Talks despite Pyongyang’s hope to improve ties with Washington through bilateral negotiations.

Aug. 17-27, 2009: The U.S. and South Korea conduct *Ulchi Freedom Guardian*, an annual joint military exercise involving about 56,000 ROK troops and 10,000 U.S. troops.

Aug. 24, 2009: Ambassador Philip Goldberg, U.S. envoy for implementing UNSC Resolution 1874, visits Seoul and says complete, verifiable denuclearization of the DPRK is “certainly our goal” and that the U.N. sanctions resolution “very much lays that out.”

Sept. 1, 2009: DPRK leader Kim Jong-il says in a commentary carried on *Pyongyang Radio*, “We can ease tensions and remove the danger of war on the peninsula when the U.S. abandons its hostile policy and signs a peace treaty with us.”

Sept. 3-8, 2009: U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Bosworth visits China, South Korea, and Japan for consultations on resuming Six-Party Talks.

Sept. 4, 2009: DPRK says that it has entered a final phase of uranium enrichment, and is building more nuclear weapons with spent fuel rods extracted from its only operating plutonium-producing reactor.

Sept. 16, 2009: In a memorandum, President Obama says the U.S. will withhold funding for the DPRK and several other countries for their poor human rights record involving human trafficking in accordance with section 110 of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000.

Sept. 20, 2009: Military sources in Korea say the U.S. has started deploying its latest *Apache* attack helicopters in the ROK to strengthen its deterrent capabilities.

Sept. 22, 2009: State Department spokesman Ian Kelly reiterates that the U.S. will provide a package of incentives to the DPRK if it takes irreversible steps toward its denuclearization.

Sept. 22, 2009: An ROK official at the Ministry of National Defense says the ROK has no plan to participate in the U.S.-led global ballistic missile defense (BMD) network.

Sept. 23, 2009: President Obama says that Iran and the DPRK “must be held accountable” if they continue to put their pursuit of nuclear weapons ahead of international security.

Sept. 29, 2009: U.S. Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg travels to Korea as part of week-long Asia tour.

Sept. 30, 2009: *KCNA* rejects Lee Myung-bak’s “grand bargain” idea unless the ROK first discards confrontational policies.