

## **Smile Diplomacy - The First Roh-Bush Summit**

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**May 19, 2003**

President Roh Moo-hyun's first visit to the United States was a success. The summit's goals, naturally, define success. President Roh and his host President George W. Bush achieved all three of their apparent goals. First, they reaffirmed that the US-ROK alliance remains as solid as a rock. The two presidents hinted in their joint statement that they disagree on some significant issues. But they proclaimed their determination to resolve them together. Secondly, they sent Pyongyang a clear message that Washington and Seoul share the goal of a nuclear free Korean Peninsula and prefer a peaceful diplomatic resolution to the continuing impasse with North Korea over its nuclear ambitions. Finally, President Roh reassured the American business community that Korea is a good place to invest.

Nevertheless, the summit may complicate two unmentioned problems: anti-Americanism in South Korea and Seoul-Pyongyang relations. America's critics in South Korea are certain to criticize President Roh for not asserting publicly his wish list to President Bush. Likewise, Pyongyang can be expected to grumble that the summit reveals President Roh's alleged willingness to subordinate his policies to those of Washington, D.C.

### ***“Photo Op Summit”***

President Roh Moo-hyun departed Washington just as he arrived - smiling. He had reason to smile. Everything had gone according to the carefully crafted script. He and President Bush did exactly as their advisers had recommended. They smiled at each other, shook each others hands, patted one another on the back, said nice things to each other and issued a warmly worded joint statement. Rather than a summit, the entire event played out like a “photo op” as State Department Public Affairs officials call photographic opportunities that following substantive diplomatic discussions.

President Roh visited the United States more to look and to be seen than to engage in substantive dialogue. It was his first visit to the United States, and only second trip outside his homeland. Only one day of his three day visit was spent in Washington, D.C. The rest of the time he was in New York and Los Angeles. He had important economic business to do in New York. There he visited the New York Stock Exchange and addressed the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

The trip was a so-called “working” visit, not a state visit. A working visit is much less prestigious. There is no official pomp and ceremony, no marching bands, speech to Congress or state dinner. The two presidents merely meet, talk and bid one another farewell.

Even a joint press conference was ruled out. Instead, Roh and Bush appeared long enough in the Rose Garden to say nice things about each other and the strength of the US-ROK alliance. Behind them stood a colorful wall of red, white and blue U.S. and South Korean flags. Obviously, this was a “photo op.” After five minutes of picture taking, they disappeared into the White House. CNN aired live coverage of the brief event. NBC gave the summit about thirty seconds of coverage at the end of its nightly news broadcast, just before its last story about the negative effects of eating Oreo cookies.

### ***Celebrating Partnership***

The joint statement released after the brief, 90 minute summit obviously had been drafted and finalized in advance. It’s most outstanding feature is the numerous assurances that the US-ROK alliance remains solid and “dynamic.” References to “alliance” or “bilateral” appear seven times, “cooperation” or “working together” thirteen times. Goals are shared, pledges are reaffirmed, policies coordinated and partners consulted. Nevertheless, all this “smile” diplomacy and warm wording could not completely camouflage two areas of substantial disagreement.

The alliance remains sturdy, but glossing over their substantive bilateral disagreements does not promote resolution of them, nor strengthen the alliance. President Roh made known in interviews with the politically liberal *New York Times* (May 13) and conservative *Wall Street Journal* (May 13) and the *Washington Times* (May 12) what he hoped to accomplish in his summit with Bush. Comparing President Roh’s wish list before the summit with the joint statement issued afterward indicates Bush gave Roh little of significance.

## US-South Korea Security Relationship

President Roh hopes to redefine the role of U.S. forces in Korea. He told the *Washington Times* on May 12 that these forces, "... carry two meanings ... They ... deterrent ... North Korea ..." and are "... a balancing force ..." for security in Northeast Asia. The next day he told the *New York Times* that he would "... urge President Bush not to remove American forces" from the area north of Seoul and south of the Demilitarized Zone that separates the two Koreas. Roh told the *Wall Street Journal* he would like to see such a move postponed. Much earlier, Roh had made clear his determination to revise the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that governs the legal status of U.S. military personnel in South Korea. SOFA, as it is commonly called, is a major cause of anti-American sentiment in South Korea.

Roh's wishes could alter profoundly the US-South Korea defense alliance. The United States has long argued that its troops in South Korea are there solely to defend its ally from North Korean aggression. President Roh is suggesting that they assume a region wide role. He may be thinking more about U.S. strategic forces, its triad of nuclear armed bombers, ballistic missiles and submarines as a counter to China's similar capabilities, and possibly North Korea's potential nuclear capability.

The U.S., however, would prefer to avoid such a posture to minimize the risk to its intensive commercial engagement of China. Surprisingly, Roh did not refer to Japan's potential regional role despite its close alliance with Washington and growing defense cooperation with Seoul.

The post-summit joint statement indicates Roh received little or nothing regarding his wish list. The joint statement's third paragraph reads in part, "... the two leaders agreed to work out plans to consolidate U.S. forces around key hubs and to relocate the Yongsan garrison ..." The first part of this statement indicates that they "agreed to work together," but clearly they made no progress toward bridging the gap in their differences regarding the future role of U.S. forces in East Asia..

As for the relocation of the U.S. headquarters out of Yongsan (the center of Seoul where the Japanese Imperial Army once maintained its headquarters), this was decided already in 1994. Action was suspended, however, when the U. S. Army demanded that the Seoul government pay \$1 billion for the relocation's cost. The summit did not resolve this or other potentially contentious issues, including:

- the amount of future South Korean government host nation support for U.S. Forces Korea,

- the future location of US Forces Korea ground combat units, and
- the Status of Forces Agreement.

### ***Dealing with North Korea***

President Roh outlined his preference regarding North Korea prior to arriving in Washington, D.C. On May 12, he told the *Washington Times* he wanted “... to discuss with President Bush that the circumstances on the Korean Peninsula may not be appropriate ...” to apply his principle of pre-emptive counter proliferation. The Bush Administration announced this strategy last December and promptly cited it when a shipment of North Korean ballistic missiles en route to Yemen was seized on the high seas.

Then on May 13, Roh told the *Wall Street Journal*, “I think coercive measures have to wait until we have exhausted all possible efforts at dialogue with North Korea.” Roh added, “If the U.S. makes up its mind to resolve this issue through diplomacy, it can do so.” This, he concluded, “might require concessions.” Bush has repeatedly dismissed any possibility of rewarding “North Korea’s nuclear blackmail” with “concessions.”

But to send Pyongyang the message that it cannot drive a wedge between the two allies, Roh and Bush glossed over their differences regarding North Korea. In their joint statement, they accented the positive. Regarding North Korea’s nuclear ambitions, the two leaders agreed they want “the complete verifiable and irreversible elimination of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program through peaceful means based on international cooperation.” The entire world can agree to this. Even North Korea has indicated it too would like to negotiate the end of its nuclear weapons program.

The one possible concession to Roh may have been the joint statement’s reference to the possibility of Russia and other nations playing “constructive role in multilateral diplomacy.” The Bush, like the Clinton Administration, has been leery of including Russia in their strategy to end North Korea’s nuclear program.

### ***Post-Summit Heart Burn***

Diplomats on both sides may have tried too hard to convey the image of partnership and normalcy in the US-South Korea relationship. The joint statement contains a profuse use of terms of endearment. Their obvious intent was to project a

sense of mutual trust and collaboration. But this could back fire, both in Seoul and Pyongyang.

Pyongyang is certain to claim that President Roh was not faithful to the spirit of the South-North Joint Statement that President Kim Dae-jung and North Korea's Supreme Commander Kim Jong Il signed at their June 2000 summit. Their joint statement affirmed that the two Koreas would, "...resolve the question of reunification independently and through joint efforts of the Korean people ...". Pyongyang can be counted on to accuse President Roh of bowing to Bush.

In South Korea, Koreans prone toward anti-American sentiment are likely to criticize their president for allegedly having returned home empty handed. This domestic political pressure could stiffen President Roh's resolve in the days ahead to assert his nation's interests more resolutely once US-South Korea talks turn to addressing outstanding bilateral issues. Similarly, President Roh could prove much less flexible in the future regarding strategy for dealing with North Korea.

### ***The Beginning is Not the End***

Nevertheless, it was better for the US-South Korea alliance to have President Roh warmly welcomed to Washington. First impressions are important, and this was his first visit to the United States. But now the time has come to move toward resolution of the complex and potentially very dangerous issues on the Korean Peninsula.

First, however, both presidents have some work at home to complete. In Washington, President Bush has yet to formulate a realistic and consistent strategy for dealing with North Korea's nuclear threat. Neither ignoring it nor belittling it can make the problem go away. As for President Roh, he will have to achieve some concrete progress regarding South Korea's preferred alteration of the security relationship with the United States. Otherwise, his critics at home will erode his credibility, undercutting in the process his ability to deal assertively both with Washington and Pyongyang.

Meanwhile, both Presidents Roh and Bush will be keeping a close eye on Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi's preferences regarding security in Northeast Asia, particularly regarding North Korea's nuclear threat.

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