

**The Bush-Roh Summit of September 14, 2006
Let's Keep Talking –**

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The relationship between U.S. President George Bush and his South Korean counterpart President Roh Moo-hyun has stabilized. This became evident during their fourth summit on September 14 in Washington, D.C. They are neither good “buddies” like Prime Minister Koizumi and President Bush, nor adversaries. Koizumi has been to Bush’s Texas ranch, but not Roh who is only invited to the White House for lunch. After a rather turbulent start, the two leaders have refined their ability to appear cordial with each other and to avoid public remarks that reveal significant differences in their approaches to key issues. This is very important. Their previous public displays of personal friction worked to North Korea’s advantage. It facilitated Pyongyang’s efforts to manipulate Seoul against Washington. This appears to have been this summit’s most important achievement.

Early in their relationship, both men exposed their disagreements through their outspoken and candid public remarks. This was particularly true of their very different approaches to dealing with North Korea. Both men agree that the best solution to the “North Korea problem” is a peaceful diplomatic resolution achieved via the Six Party Talks. At this point, they continue to fundamentally disagree. President Bush prefers coercive diplomacy and blunt rhetoric in the hope of compelling Pyongyang to submit to his will. President Roh prefers diplomatic rhetoric and economic inducements in an effort to convince North Korea into halt its provocative behavior. Neither man’s approach has achieved the desired results.

On the other hand, during this summit, Bush and Roh shielded their continuing differences from public view. This could temper Pyongyang’s efforts to manipulate the two allies against one another. At the same time, however, it is clear from their public comments that both remain very much at odds over how to deal with North Korea, as well as other key bilateral issues.

North Korea

According to the U.S. State Department’s report about the summit, President Roh publicly claimed, “President (Bush) and I agreed to work together for the restart of the Six Party Talks. ... our ministers and staff will be consulting closely.” Separately,

President Roh told the press that he was not ready to discuss “sanctions,” an obvious reference to President Bush’s intensifying campaign to escalate economic pressure on Pyongyang in a effort to convince it to return to the Six Party Talks.

At the same time, President Bush declared that North Korea’s missile launchings and refusal to return to the Six Party Talks, “has really strengthened an alliance of five nations that are determined to solve this issue peacefully.” This is nothing new. A all the Six Party Talks’ participants, including North Korea, jointly issued a statement one year ago in Beijing that essentially said the same thing.

Put together, the two presidents’ remarks do not add up to an agreement on how to deal with Pyongyang, except possibly regarding Bush’s “military option.” Since the US-ROK summits began, President Bush has stopped talking about his “military option.” President Roh has been in the pass adamant in his opposition to the use of military force against North Korea. Bush’s change in this regard could reflect sensitivity to his South Korean ally’s sensitivities. But it could also reflect the reality that US military forces are concentrated in the Middle East and handle another armed confrontation in East Asia.

War Time Operational Command

Again, both presidents’ public remarks were carefully crafted to accent the positive in the US-South Korea relationship, but at the same time these remarks reveal a lack of progress toward an agreement on when the US will transfer war time operational command of South Korean forces to the South Korean government. Since the Korean War, the United States, under the United Nations Command and later the bilaterally agreed upon Combined Forces Command, have retained the authority to direct South Korea’s military in the event of another Korean War. Since the 1980’s, however, South Korea has demanded that this authority be returned to the South Korean president.

President Roh, despite keen opposition among South Korea’s former Defense Ministers and retired generals, insists that operation command is a matter of “national sovereignty.” Abruptly earlier this year, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld agreed to the transfer effective in 2008 when a new US president takes office. But President Roh countered that the transfer should be delayed until 2012.

At their just concluded summit, Bush and Roh agreed that this difference should not become “a political issue.” Translated into plain English, this means the two presidents did not reach an agreement, but instead have deferred the issue to their staff for continuing consultations.

Japan-South Korea Military Coordination at Risk?

For Japan, this matter is directly linked to the US-Japan alliance. Coordination between the US, Japan and South Korea in the event of another war on the Korean Peninsula will be much more difficult once Korea assumes responsibility for war time operational control of its military forces. Previously, the United States has acted as an intermediary and the coordinator between Seoul and Tokyo regarding the very politically sensitive

issue of Japan's military role in Northeast Asia. Japan would do well to take note of South Korea's position regarding war time control because it is certain to complicate their already troubled bilateral relations. At the same time, Pyongyang must be watching closely. The possibility of friction between Japan and South Korea regarding the US alliances with Seoul and Tokyo could erode the effectiveness of trilateral US-South Korea-Japan deterrence aimed at convincing North Korea not to take any pre-emptive military action against one of the three allies.

Other Issues

Nor did Presidents Bush and Roh achieve agreement on other key bilateral issues. Regarding visa waiver, President Bush declared that, "we will work together to see if we can't get this issue resolved as quickly as possible." Translated, this means an agreement was not reached but the two sides will continue to discuss the matter. As for a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA), their silence on this issue indicates a lack of agreement. Such an agreement is imperative if the United States wishes to regain some of the trade it has lost to South Korea's new largest trade partner, China.

In short, President Roh returned home empty handed, but at least it would appear that President Bush remains focused on pursuing a diplomatic end to North Korea's nuclear programs and is not yet leaning toward his "military option."