

IS THIS THE END OF BUMPY SUMMITS BETWEEN TWO ALLIES?

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For the first time in a decade the leaders of the United States and Korea held an amiable summit meeting. The meetings between presidents Clinton and Kim Dae-jung were cordial, as they agreed on policy toward North Korea. But after George W. Bush took office the relationship between the two long-time allies deteriorated. The first meeting between presidents Kim and Bush was disastrous, and many Koreans were offended by the perception of discourtesies of the new U.S. Administration. It was clear that the new administration was taking a more confrontational approach with North Korea and that it was skeptical of the “Sunshine Policy” that was formulated and implemented under the Kim administration. The first meeting between Bush and Roh Moo-hyun was not even called a summit. Despite the fact that it was Roh’s first trip to the United States as president, the trip was labeled as an official trip rather than a formal state visit. And, because of their differences on most basic issues, their first meeting was said to be the most difficult summit ever held by the leaders of the two countries. The relationship began to improve with Lee Myung-bak’s meeting with Bush last year. They shared business backgrounds, conservative free market principles, and pragmatic assessments of North Korea. But President Lee’s decision on the eve of the summit to lift the restriction on imports of U.S. beef nearly ended his presidency. The Korean public was infuriated by this agreement, and many saw it as a “political gift” to Bush before the summit.

The Obama-Lee summit on June 16 seems to have been a success. They reaffirmed the security alliance between the two countries and pledged anew a continuing friendship. The two presidents spent several hours together, including a one-on-one session, expanded talks with officials, Obama’s first Rose Garden press availability with a foreign leader, and a working lunch. Undoubtedly, the leaders spent much time discussing North Korea’s nuclear threat, but they also talked about their mutual vision for the future and agreed on many important regional and global issues.

Reconfirming the Security Alliance

The summit came shortly after the U.N. Security Council voted unanimously to adopt Resolution 1874 (see separate article below), which calls for stronger sanctions in response to North Korea’s second nuclear test on May 25. In defiance of the U.N. sanctions, North Korea said that it would strengthen its nuclear capabilities and that the enrichment of uranium for nuclear weapons was progressing. Tens of thousands of North Koreans gathered in central Pyongyang shouting slogans to denounce international sanctions.

Amid increasing belligerent actions and rhetoric from North Korea and rising tension on the Korean peninsula, Obama assured Lee that his administration will continue to protect South Korea in the event of a North Korean nuclear attack. They issued a joint statement stating, “The continuing commitment of extended deterrence, including the U.S. nuclear umbrella, reinforces this assurance.” Such a commitment has been implicit since the end of the Korean War and has been confirmed over the years on several occasions, but this is the first time that the assurance has been included in a written statement. North Korean media said that a U.S. pledge to extend

its nuclear umbrella to South Korea would be considered as “declaration of a nuclear war” on the Korean peninsula and that it is “asking for the calamitous situation of having a fire shower of nuclear retaliation all over South Korea” in case of a conflict. North Korea has, for many years, been demanding that the United States remove the nuclear umbrella for South Korea. Just a week before the inauguration of Obama, it released a statement, saying “When the U.S. nuclear threat is removed and South Korea is cleared of its nuclear umbrella, we will also feel no need to keep nuclear weapons.”

Both leaders reiterated their determination to denuclearize the Korean peninsula and agreed that the new U.N. resolution must be fully enforced, which the North has said it would consider an act of war. Furthermore, Obama called North Korea’s nuclear ambitions a “grave threat” to the world, and he vowed to end the North’s practice of nuclear brinkmanship by threatening neighboring countries and then being rewarded with incentives for backing away. They made it clear that North Korea will not be recognized as a nuclear weapons state under any circumstances and urged the country to return to the negotiation table. The leaders also held out the possibility that a nuclear-free North Korea could gain peace and prosperity with outside world.

Collaboration on Bilateral, Regional, and Global Issues

Bilateral Issues: Another important topic in President Lee’s agenda, the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA), was overshadowed by the North Korea nuclear issue. Korea and the United States agreed in 2007 to a free trade deal that would reduce tariffs and other barriers to trade. The agreement was promoted as a potential \$10 billion boost in bilateral trade annually. This is the only issue on which the two leaders did not see eye to eye. Although Obama expressed support for a free trade pact, he said the two sides should further address the issues of imbalance in the auto trade in the United States and imports of U.S. beef in Korea before ratification. He added that the political timing of presenting the agreement to Congress could pose another challenge. Some analysts warned that any push for quick ratification could make the situation worse, as many in Congress are unwilling to talk about a trade deal at this time of economic difficulties. U.S. legislators also indicated that healthcare reform and energy regulation will take priority this year over any trade deals. During the election campaign, Obama voiced objection to the trade pact between the United States and Korea and urged Bush to renegotiate it.

Another major bilateral issue discussed during the summit was the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON). Obama and Lee said that both countries will review and assess the planned transfer of OPCON from U.S. to Korean commanders and will work closely throughout the process. They reconfirmed that the transfer will take place on April 17, 2012 as scheduled. But in Korea calls to delay the agreed 2012 transfer of OPCON have been growing as the threat from North Korea has escalated in recent months. They said that security conditions on Korean peninsula have changed drastically from 2007, when an agreement on OPCON transfer was reached.

Regional Problems: They pledged to improve the lives of the people in the Asia-Pacific region and to keep the peace in the area. Working together with civic groups, the leaders hope to promote human rights, democracy, free markets, and trade and investment liberalization. The

two governments also promised to play an role in promoting mutual understanding and transparency regarding security issues among the countries in Asia Pacific region.

Global Challenges: The leaders of the two countries showed their commitment to work together as strategic partners in dealing with global challenges such as climate change, cooperation on energy resources, and the international financial crisis. They also agreed to resist protectionism. Under the partnership, they vowed to work closely to address terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, piracy, narcotics, poverty, infringement of human rights, energy security, and epidemic diseases. The joint alliance also calls for enhanced coordination on peacekeeping, post-conflict stabilization, and development assistance.

Did Korea Get What It Asked For?

The two presidents spoke in unison concerning North Korea and sent a strong message to North Korea about their joint security alliance. The Korean side wanted a security guarantee from the United States, and Obama provided the commitment in a written statement. President Lee said that he was consequently less fearful of a possible North Korea attack, stating, “When they look at the firm partnership and alliance that we have between our two countries, they will think twice about taking any measures that they will regret.” However, some critics said that the summit did not present practical solutions for dealing with the North’s nuclear threat, while escalating the tension on the Korean peninsula. The North had said that it would “surely judge” the Lee government for participating in a U.S.-led international campaign to “stifle” the North. Others said that the U.S. commitment to grant a “nuclear umbrella” to South Korea provided the North with a stronger justification for possessing nuclear capabilities. North Korea had made it clear that its motivation for building nuclear weapons is self-defense.

Most people agreed that the summit was less successful with regard to the trade deal. The Korean side expected a stronger commitment from Obama about the prospects for the ratification of the KORUS FTA; however, as noted above, he declined to give a direct answer. He said that his government wanted to work “constructively” with Korea in a “systematic way” to resolve barriers and that he is committed to moving forward in adopting the FTA. Some said his words seemed to indicate that the U.S. government would not approve the trade pact without some modification and revision. Optimists, however, argued that the fact that Obama did not specify the order in which pending FTAs would be approved first could be taken as a signal that Korea’s FTA could be ratified before Panama and Columbia.

Overall, the summit was a success. America’s liberal president and Korea’s conservative leader agreed on most issues and offered a joint statement of collaboration. It has been a while since the leaders of the two countries shared similar views and values regarding critical challenges facing the Korean peninsula. Finally, they see eye to eye.