

BUSH-ROH SUMMIT: EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS?

by Jack Pritchard (jp@keia.org)

This past June, President Bush made a series of telephone calls to leaders in the region calling on them to use their influence with Pyongyang in an effort to halt North Korean preparations to launch a Taepo Dong missile. When the news media pointed out that Bush had not called President Roh Moo-hyun, South Korean officials quickly arranged a mid-September Summit in Washington between President Bush and President Roh in an attempt to demonstrate the closeness of the U.S.-ROK relationship and put an end to speculation that the alliance was adrift.

North Korea launched seven missiles on July 5 (Pyongyang time) setting off a United Nations Security Council debate on how to respond to what was seen as provocative and unsettling behavior by the North. Early in the debate Japan, backed by the United States, sought tough sanctions that could be enforced by military action if necessary. Seoul, Beijing, and Moscow registered their objections to this course of action, and, even though the Security Council later unanimously adopted UNSC Resolution 1695 (without the military enforcement provision), media speculation about the Bush-Roh Summit focused on public differences in policy toward North Korea as well as a potential disagreement about the timing of the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) of forces from the United States to South Korea. Even though the issue of wartime OPCON has been under discussion for years among U.S. and ROK military counterparts, the issue quickly became political once President Roh publicly called for the wartime OPCON to be “returned” to Korea by 2012 and U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld suggested that 2009 was a more appropriate date. Retired generals and defense ministers in Seoul called on President Roh to reconsider his position. The opposition Grand National Party also campaigned against wartime OPCON transfer.

With an apparent discord over North Korea policy, concern over the timing of transfer of wartime OPCON, uncertainty about the outcome of the FTA negotiations, and a decision by Seoul and Washington that there would not be a joint statement coming out of the summit meeting, skeptics in both countries expressed concern about the outcome of the summit. At the very least, expectations for a positive summit were very low. However, by all accounts, the summit held on September 14 was a success. Both presidents seemed relaxed in each other’s company and said the right things during a brief press conference. President Bush reassured President Roh that the United States remains committed to the security of South Korea and that the timing for the transfer of wartime OPCON will be decided through consultations between the two defense ministries and not be subject to political considerations.

In an attempt to rejuvenate the six-party talks, Seoul developed a “common and broad approach” that would be offered North Korea. At the Bush-Roh summit each president agreed that consultations should continue to refine the proposal. In a meeting with twelve U.S. opinion leaders at Blair House following the summit with President Bush, President Roh said he understood that he had disappointed many in the news media who had hoped that the summit would not succeed in order to be able to write about the gaps in the alliance. President Roh made a point in that meeting to emphasize that, while South Korea did not use the term “sanctions,” his government had imposed what was tantamount to sanctions against North Korea after the July 5 missile launches.

Preliminary reports from the 10th Security Policy Initiative (SPI) meeting held September 27–28 indicated that few points of agreement were reached between senior defense officials of the two countries concerning wartime OPCON transfer. Both parties stuck to their original estimates for the timing of the transfer. Attention now turns to the Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) involving the U.S. Secretary of Defense and the ROK Minister of Defense October 20–21 to see if a consensus can be reached.

In other positive developments coming out of the summit, President Bush indicated to President Roh that the United States would switch its current approach from encouraging the candidacy of multiple United Nations Secretary General candidates to exclusively supporting the candidacy of South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon during the series of straw balloting that takes place before a formal vote by the United Nations Security Council. In the first three straw votes, Ban received positive encouragement from 13 to 14 of the 15 Security Council members. On October 2, the Security Council held a fourth straw vote using a color coding system whereby the Permanent Five members having veto power over the selection of the next Secretary General would indicate an “encourage or discourage” vote by using a blue ballot. Non-permanent Security Council members would use a white ballot. The color differentiation allows candidates to know whether they are being opposed by a veto-wielding permanent member of the Security Council, thus narrowing the field before the final vote expected by the end of October. In

the October 2 voting, Ban received 14 “encourage” votes with full support from the permanent five members of the Security Council.