

U.S.-Korea Relations:

After the Koizumi-Kim Summit, Nothing is the Same

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This quarter began with a serious naval confrontation between North and South Korean patrol vessels on Korea's West Sea. It ended with the surprising diplomatic breakthrough in Japan-North Korea relations at the Koizumi-Kim summit in mid-September and the ensuing U.S. decision to send Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly to Pyongyang for consultations. Through it all, the Bush administration watched warily, postponing its special envoy's planned trip to Pyongyang in July, but cautiously welcoming the results of the summit meeting. Strategists planning the next U.S. diplomatic move now have to pay greater attention both to Japanese policy and South Korean public opinion to avoid weakening U.S. standing in the Northeast Asia region. This is especially true given growing anti-American sentiments in the ROK, stimulated by the tragic death of two South Korean girls during a U.S. military training accident.

The North-South Naval Clash and its Aftermath

In early July, it seemed that once again security relationships on the Korean Peninsula could revert to a state of Cold War hostility. In the aftermath of the West Sea naval incident on June 29 that left five South Koreans and an indeterminate number of North Koreans dead, both governments resorted to strong rhetorical attacks on the other. The U.S. administration, speaking through Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, placed the blame for the naval confrontation squarely on North Korea.

In the days following the naval incident, the South Korean Defense Ministry argued that South Korea was too passive in responding to a North Korean provocation. The Defense Ministry and U.S. Forces Korea agreed to revise the "naval rules of engagement" so South Korean vessels could respond more aggressively in the future to questionable North Korea naval activity.

The diplomatic repercussions of the West Sea incident were felt immediately. The U.S. suspended its plan to send Assistant Secretary of State Kelly to Pyongyang later in July, saying that the current atmosphere was not conducive to beginning negotiations. (The Kelly meeting, when it occurs, will be the highest-level contact between North Korea and the United States since the Bush administration took office). While the administration's rationale for breaking off talks was not made public, it seemed that before resuming

negotiations, the U.S. wanted to assess whether North Korea had intentionally instigated the hostile activity.

The ASEAN Regional Forum, KEDO Ceremony, and Bolton Visit

For the following several weeks, until the meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in late July, the status of U.S.-North Korea relations – and consequently, the plan to resume bilateral negotiations – remained in limbo. The atmosphere improved in the last week of July, when Pyongyang took the unusual step of issuing a statement of regret for the late June naval confrontation and said it would welcome a U.S. envoy's visit. Washington responded by noting with satisfaction the North Korean statement, and by agreeing to an informal meeting between Secretary of State Colin Powell and North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun at the ARF talks. When this meeting finally took place on July 31, it was anticlimactic – a 15-minute chat over coffee – but Secretary of State Powell reaffirmed that the U.S. desired to resume negotiations with Pyongyang on security issues. He did not agree, however, to set a specific date for the visit of Assistant Secretary of State Kelly to North Korea.

Following this meeting, North Korea tried to create as much momentum as possible for the resumption of bilateral talks with the U.S. by proposing a meeting on security issues with the UN Command (whose delegation is led by a U.S. two-star general) at Panmunjom. On Aug. 6, the first such meeting in two years took place and the two sides cordially discussed procedures for preventing a recurrence of any naval confrontations in the future.

The ceremony held by the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) in North Korea on Aug. 7, to mark the initial pouring of concrete for the first light-water reactor it is constructing, was particularly significant in terms of U.S. policy. Earlier in the year, Bush administration conservatives said they aimed to use this “milestone” to force North Korea to accept early inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of its nuclear facilities. Without satisfaction from North Korea on this demand, they implied, the U.S. would declare a North Korean breach of the 1994 Agreed Framework and refuse to endorse the pouring of the concrete.

Instead of declaring a breach, however, U.S. officials led by North Korea Policy Coordinator Jack Pritchard attended the ceremony and, by their presence, lent support to the on-going construction of the light-water reactor under the KEDO agreement. Pritchard, nevertheless, made a strong statement stressing the importance of North Korea reaching agreement with the U.S. on the inspection issue in the near future.

From this outcome, it appears that the moderates and conservatives in the Bush administration in early August reached a tentative, if uneasy, truce on how to deal with the Agreed Framework, which conservatives still find highly problematic. For the moment, conservatives seemed to have acquiesced to the position that the KEDO project (strongly supported both by South Korea and Japan) should go forward. But the U.S.

hardliners put down a marker that the Agreed Framework is at severe risk if North Korea does not agree to the U.S. demand for early inspections.

When Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs John Bolton visited South Korea in late August, his statements seemed to reflect this compromise. Known as perhaps the most hawkish member of the State Department on North Korea, Bolton has long criticized the Agreed Framework as a form of U.S. appeasement of Pyongyang. Both the South Korean government and the U.S. Embassy in Seoul registered early concern that if Bolton took too hard a line in his planned speech in Seoul, it could create a new breach in U.S.-North Korea relations.

In the final draft of his speech delivered in Seoul, Bolton reiterated President George W. Bush's characterization of North Korea as a member of an "axis of evil" and once again emphasized the need for North Korea to agree to early IAEA inspections of its nuclear facilities. In other respects, he reiterated the position taken by Secretary Powell at the ARF that the U.S. desired to resume bilateral negotiations with North Korea and supported recent improvements in inter-Korean relations.

The Koizumi-Kim Summit

The announcement on Aug. 30 that Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro of Japan would visit North Korea in mid-September for a summit meeting with Kim Jong-il came as a major surprise. While Japanese and North Korean diplomats had met on several occasions over the summer (including a meeting of foreign ministers in late July at the ARF and a working meeting on current issues on August), no observers had predicted Koizumi would take this bold step.

Koizumi admitted publicly that if he was unsuccessful in resolving the most emotional issue dividing Japan and North Korea – the question of Japanese nationals that Pyongyang's intelligence service abducted during the Cold War – the trip would be "political suicide." The Japanese Foreign Ministry was also concerned that the prime minister would make progress not just on security issues of importance to Japan, but also on issues of mutual concern to the United States and South Korea – especially the nuclear and missile issues. Without such progress, Koizumi would have been open to an attack from conservatives in Japan and the United States for conferring prestige and presumably, the promise of future economic aid, on Pyongyang without gaining enough concrete concessions in return.

The official U.S. position on the Koizumi trip was reflected in the statement issued by the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) that met in Seoul on Sept. 6-7. The TCOG supported the prime minister's trip by stressing the importance of engaging North Korea in diplomatic discussions of security issues. Moreover, for the first time since the outset of the Bush administration, TCOG positively assessed Pyongyang's recent "constructive attitude" toward the international community. This comment presumably referred both to North Korea's statement of regret for the late June naval confrontation (which the South portrayed as an "apology" although it appeared not to go that far) and

its willingness to make progress on North-South issues (including family reunions, rail and highway links across the Demilitarized Zone, and the Mt. Kumgang project) at inter-Korean talks during August.

Prior to traveling to North Korea for the summit, Prime Minister Koizumi met with President Bush at the opening of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. Bush expressed support for Koizumi's trip and put to rest any speculation that the prime minister was proceeding without U.S. backing.

At the Pyongyang summit meeting on Sept. 17, the prime minister achieved several concrete concessions from North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. On issues specific to Japan, Kim apologized for and provided information about Japanese nationals that the North abducted during the Cold War period. He confessed to sending intelligence gathering vessels off the Japanese coast and promised that North Korea would not engage in future conduct that threatens Japanese security.

On the issues of greatest importance to the United States, North Korea: 1) promised to comply with all international agreements to obtain "an overall resolution of the nuclear issues on the Korean Peninsula" and 2) agreed to extend its moratorium on test launching of missiles beyond 2003, the deadline it previously indicated. There were also reports after the summit that the Japanese terrorists North Korea had long harbored would soon return to Japan. This would be a necessary step for the U.S. to remove North Korea from its list of states sponsoring terrorism.

Immediate reaction from Washington to Koizumi's achievements was positive but caveated by the need for "further study." A State Department official said anonymously "we welcome and support Prime Minister Koizumi's efforts. We note that he discussed matters of particular Japanese concern but also raised security issues of broad international interest on which the U.S. and Japan share concerns. We are actively considering what the next steps should be."

U.S. Ambassador to Korea Thomas Hubbard commented that the U.S. "is studying these developments very carefully, very closely... Our offer to have dialogue with North Korea remains on the table." Indeed, the biggest question following the summit was the extent to which it would facilitate direct U.S. talks with North Korea – and specifically the previously postponed visit to Pyongyang of Assistant Secretary Kelly.

From the U.S. standpoint, the summit results indicate a new desire and possible diplomatic flexibility in North Korea to negotiate a resolution of the nuclear and missile issues. North Korea's statement to Koizumi on nuclear matters signaled a willingness to negotiate early IAEA inspection of its nuclear facilities, and meet this core U.S. demand. Pyongyang's agreement to extend the moratorium on missile tests past 2003 demonstrated that North Korea seems willing to curb its missile development program (as well as its missile exports) as the price of normalizing relations with the United States. These summit results tend to strengthen the case that negotiations on "threat reduction"

with North Korea are likely to succeed. In that sense, they do pave the way for the resumption of bilateral U.S.-North Korea talks on security issues.

Whether Bush administration conservatives will continue to resist or impede full-blown diplomatic negotiations with North Korea is still an open question. Conservatives still view any North Korean promises and statements with deep skepticism and object to giving North Korea access to development assistance. Even if Japan's economic aid induced North Korea to engage in significant threat reduction, conservatives might regard the prospect of such a deal as a form of "appeasement" and object on ideological grounds. Nevertheless, the Bush administration decision in late September to send Assistant Secretary of State Kelly to Pyongyang for consultations opens an important line of communication with North Korea that could become the basis for significant negotiations in the future.

Growing Anti-Americanism in South Korea

During this quarter, anti-American sentiments continued to build within the South Korean public. The immediate cause of growing animosity toward U.S. soldiers, in particular, was the tragic death of two Korean girls in a spring training accident. In response to a public campaign and series of demonstrations led by Korean civic groups, the U.S. military command and U.S. Embassy issued sincere apologies, offered compensation to the families of the deceased girls, and promised that the soldiers would be prosecuted for negligent homicide before a U.S. military tribunal.

The core demand of the Korean activists was that the U.S. military should turn over the accused soldiers to the Korean court system for investigation and prosecution. The U.S. military rejected this demand, noting that the soldiers were carrying out official duties at the time of accident, and thus the U.S. would not allow the Korean authorities to assert jurisdiction under the U.S.-Korea Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). (According to the SOFA, an off-duty U.S. soldier who commits a suspected rape or homicide is to be turned over to Korean officials for prosecution).

The activists' campaign to mobilize public opinion against the U.S. led to a serious incident on Sept. 14, when demonstrators apparently assaulted three off-duty U.S. servicemen in a subway train and then abducted one for several hours. Police "rescued" two of the servicemen but the activists apparently took the third to an outdoor rally, where he was forced to confess to the "errors" in the U.S. position on legal jurisdiction over U.S. soldiers. Later, police charged all three servicemen with attacking the Korean demonstrators.

After the U.S. military command and U.S. Embassy vigorously protested the actions of the Korean police and demonstrators, Korean prosecutors announced they would conduct an impartial investigation. The U.S. Embassy officially issued a warning to all U.S. residents in Korea following the incident.

Another contributing cause for anti-Americanism during the quarter was the continuing controversy over the location of new U.S. Embassy residential housing in downtown Seoul. Civic activists claim that the planned housing will be built on the site of a traditional Korean shrine and have sought to block issuance of a construction permit. The U.S. Embassy is pushing hard to begin construction, rather than look for a new site on the outskirts of Seoul.

Prospects

At the end of the quarter, the biggest question is how U.S. diplomacy toward North Korea will evolve in the aftermath of Prime Minister Koizumi's surprisingly successful visit to Pyongyang. Moderates in the Bush administration would clearly like to follow up the Japanese breakthrough by negotiating agreement with Pyongyang on early IAEA inspections of North Korea's nuclear facilities and on ending North Korea's exports and development program for missiles. They hope that North Korea will indicate some newfound flexibility on these issues in upcoming bilateral consultations with Assistant Secretary of State Kelly. In the course of its own negotiations to normalize relations with Pyongyang, Japan is also likely to press hard on these issues.

Bush administration conservatives who continue to argue for a hardline approach, no matter how well Japan's negotiations with North Korea proceed, now face a new dilemma. In South Korea, following the Koizumi-Kim summit, the public increasingly views the Bush administration as trying to block inter-Korean reconciliation and eventual Korean reunification. The U.S. alone, it is said, now seeks to threaten and isolate North Korea, while its closest regional allies – Japan and South Korea – seek a diplomatic resolution of security issues. The risks for the U.S. government of sticking to a hardline position regarding North Korea, especially given the generally high level of public anti-Americanism among the South Korean public, have thus significantly increased at the current time.

Chronology of U.S.-Korea Relations July-September 2002

July 2, 2002: U.S. rescinds offer to meet with North Korea the following week, following West Sea naval clash.

July 3, 2002: U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld says North Korea initiated naval clash.

July 19, 2002: First public reports emerge that North Korea is scrapping its decades old rationing system and instituting price reform.

July 20, 2002: U.S. military team enters North Korea to search for the remains of Korean war dead.

July 22, 2002: ROK Defense Ministry says it does not expect the U.S. to give up jurisdiction over two soldiers accused of negligently killing two girls in a training exercise.

July 25, 2002: North Korea proposes to resume talks with South Korea and expresses regret over June 29 naval clash.

July 26, 2002: North Korea says it is ready to receive a U.S. envoy to resume bilateral security talks. Washington welcomes Pyongyang's "apology" for the naval incident.

July 31, 2002: U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun meet at ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Brunei.

Aug. 2, 2002: North Korea proposes military talks with U.N. Command to discuss June 29 naval incident.

Aug. 6, 2002: North Korean military officials meet with U.N. Command at Panmunjom for the first time in two years.

Aug. 7, 2002: Ceremony held in North Korea for the pouring of the first concrete at the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) reactor site.

Aug. 8, 2002: Yielding to U.S. demands, South Korea cuts special consumption tax on large cars up to 4 percent.

Aug. 12, 2002: Inter-Korean talks resume in Seoul on military, economic, and family reunion issues.

Aug. 13, 2002: North Korea threatens to withdraw from 1994 Agreed Framework.

Aug. 15, 2002: U.S. Under Secretary of Defense Zakheim requests more South Korean support for the war on terrorism.

Aug. 20, 2002: North Korean leader Kim Jong-il begins four-day visit to Russia.

Aug. 23, 2002: U.S. sanctions North Korea for selling missile parts to Yemen.

Aug. 25, 2002: Japan and North Korea begin two days of official talks in Pyongyang.

Aug. 29, 2002: U.S. Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security Affairs John Bolton warns North Korea on need for early nuclear inspections to avoid U.S. rescission of 1994 Agreed Framework.

Aug. 30, 2002: Japan announces Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro will visit Pyongyang Sept. 17.

Aug. 30, 2002: South and North Korea agree on cooperative projects, including cross-border rail construction.

Sept. 6-7, 2002: Japanese, South Korean, and U.S. diplomats meet in Seoul for Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meeting to discuss upcoming Koizumi visit to Pyongyang.

Sept. 7, 2002: TCOG statement reaffirms the importance of “engagement” of North Korea; recognizes North Korea’s recent “constructive attitude” toward international community.

Sept. 9, 2002: Civic groups charge Seoul city government ignored laws in issuing construction permit for new U.S. Embassy housing site.

Sept. 12, 2002: UN Command authorizes construction work on rail and highway links in the eastern portion of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

Sept. 13, 2002: President George W. Bush expresses U.S. support for Koizumi trip to Pyongyang for summit meeting with DPRK leader Kim Jong-il.

Sept. 13, 2002: U.S. Forces Korea announces trial of two soldiers for negligent homicide in deaths of two Korean girls.

Sept. 14, 2002: Korean activists abduct off-duty U.S. soldier and force him to sign “confession” at public rally protesting death of two South Korean girls.

Sept. 17, 2002: Japanese prime minister holds summit meeting with North Korean leader Kim in Pyongyang.

Sept. 18, 2002: U.S. spokesman voices support for “positive results” of Koizumi-Kim meeting in Pyongyang; North and South Korea break ground for cross-border railway project.

Sept. 19, 2002: North and South Korea begin clearing mines in the DMZ to allow construction of rail and highway links following Sept. 18 ceremonies.

Sept. 24, 2002: North and South Korea connect a military hotline to discuss issues related to the construction of rail and highway links.

Sept. 25, 2002: PM Koizumi urges the U.S. to resume dialogue “at an early date” with North Korea.

Sept. 26, 2002: U.S. announces that Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly will visit Pyongyang for consultations in early October.