

The ROK-US Summit: why beat a dead horse when you can move mountains? by Youngshik Bong and James J. Kim

Youngshik Bong (bong@asaninst.org) is the director of the National Security and Foreign Policy Center at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. James J. Kim (jjkim@asaninst.org) is the program chair and research fellow of the American Politics and Policy Program.

President Barack Obama's decision to stop in Seoul during his upcoming visit to Asia is wise given the toxic air surrounding Japan-Korea relations, fueled in part by vitriolic verbal volleys between leaders of these two countries. Not only does the visit send the right signals to its two most important allies in the region about US commitment and priorities but it also provides an opportunity to recalibrate those allies' foreign policy efforts on issues that can yield more measurable results.

The unnecessarily dangerous nationalist rhetoric by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and his closest advisors does nothing to help the US position in the region nor does it address the more immediate challenges posed by a nuclear North Korea and a rising China. It does, however, contribute to the further deterioration of the ROK-Japan relations, which is now so serious that Abe's popularity among the South Korean public is even lower than that of Kim Jong-un. South Korea's sensitivity to the way the Abe administration has dealt with historical issues is understandable. But banking on resolving these deep emotional differences during the April visit isn't likely to pay dividends for the Park Geun-hye administration.

First, the trend in US foreign policy as evidenced by its management of recent crises in Egypt, Libya, Venezuela, and Ukraine suggests an intention to lead from behind. Second, the US government's official position as announced on its Tokyo embassy website immediately after the December 2013 Yasukuni Shrine visit was to "take note of Prime Minister Abe's expression of remorse for the past and his reaffirmation of Japan's commitment to peace." Granted, it was the first time that the US embassy has expressed "disappointment" in Japan's leadership but expecting President Obama to make any bold statement or take decisive action on the issue of history given recent developments would be unrealistic.

Ironically, a history lesson provides interesting hints as to what may come of this issue if it is raised. Events surrounding President Obama's pending visit nearly parallel the summit meeting between Presidents Bush and Roh Moo-hyun in 2006. Then, the Roh government suspended summit talks with then-Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro partly after Shimane Prefecture enacted an ordinance declaring February 22 as "Takeshima Day." Repeated attempts by Roh to express South Korea's discontent at Japan's lack of reflection on its imperial past and the crimes committed during World War II fell on deaf ears. At one point, President Roh spent 45 minutes

of the 80-minute meeting between him and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice discussing Japan when the agenda was North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Roh also gave Bush a long and impassioned explanation of Korea's views on Japan during his visit to Washington. Nothing came of these efforts. The same outcome is likely during the April visit if President Park tries to raise this issue with President Obama.

Instead of beating a dead horse, both leaders can make better use of their time by focusing on areas where substantive results are more likely. One issue of critical importance for both countries is trade. There is increasing criticism of the lack of positive impact that the Korea-US (KORUS) Free Trade Agreement (FTA) has had on the US economy. The latest assessment by the Office of the US Trade Representative suggests that there could be improvements in Korea's compliance in such areas as rules of origin, medical device reimbursements, organic certification, and auto emissions standards. President Park could promise Korea's willingness to be more forthcoming about implementation of the FTA in exchange for support on South Korea's accession to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The quid pro quo can help assuage concerns of the anti-free trade camp that also opposes the Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) for the much-besieged TPP. For South Korea, the move sends a clear signal that it is ready to join the TPP and broaden its access to other markets, including that of Japan and Mexico.

With regards to security on the Korean Peninsula, both leaders could reaffirm the May 7 Joint Declaration signed in Washington DC last year which pledges that both parties will continue their work "to foster enduring peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and its peaceful reunification based on the principles of denuclearization, democracy and a free market economy." The summit will be a good opportunity for the Park administration to reaffirm its commitment to the denuclearization of North Korea while engaging the Kim regime under the banner of "the Trust Building Process."

Another area of potential cooperation is human rights. Given the recent publication of the US State Department's report on human rights as well as the scheduled release of the UN Commission of Inquiry report on human rights in North Korea, Park and Obama can reaffirm the two nations' resolve to work cooperatively to better address this issue.

Finally, there is the issue of climate change and energy. Korea is expanding the number of LNG import terminals to six by building new ones in Boryong and Samcheok, and US plans to build new export terminals in the southern and western continental US. Both leaders could reaffirm their support for greater cooperation on energy and reduction of carbon emissions through the expansion of these efforts.

President Obama's visit to Seoul is expected to be short. Small gains on consensus-building issues are far more likely

to be fruitful than a debate that is likely to lead to a dead end. Confucius has a saying – “the man who moves a mountain begins by carrying away small stones.” There is an important lesson here for South Korea and the US: why beat a dead horse when they can move mountains?

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.