Korean Hopes for U.S. Leadership under Barack Obama

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History will record November 2008 as the crucial turning point for launching a new global order. No one knows what would exactly be the form of that order, but everyone seems to be in agreement that the existing international order cannot be sustained in light of two stunning developments. First, troubles in the U.S. financial market ignited a global economic crisis of historic magnitude. Second, the election of Barack Obama offered the United States a fresh opportunity to rejuvenate her status as the pre-eminent global leader in shaping a new international order. These two developments within the United States have given the world cause for both despair and hope. The current economic crisis is so serious that there seems to be no promising way to overcome it in the foreseeable future. Thus it is a cause for despair. Yet President Obama is enjoying widespread support at home and abroad as a leader—perhaps the only leader—who could and should mobilize a global consensus to transform the international order in both economic and political spheres, and thereby put the world back on the path of global development.

As a close ally of the United States, Korean people put their hope for economic recovery as well as emergence of a new international order on the success of the Obama presidency. Koreans have no preference between the two American political parties. In recent years, however, they have been worried about a steady decline in American prestige and influence in the world arena. For more than a half century, Korea has heavily relied on the strong alliance with the United States for its security and economic development; therefore a speedy recovery of American national strength is considered an essential prerequisite for the protection of the vital national interests of the United States and Korea. Going a step further, Koreans believe that strong American leadership will ensure the inauguration of a constructive new international order, as was the case in 1945 when the United Nations was launched.

For Asia regionally, the election of Barack Obama signifies the beginning of a new era for the United States as a truly global, not regional, power. The United States has the good fortune of being located between two oceans, the Atlantic and the Pacific. For more than two hundred years, however, the American people have considered their nation only as a part of the Atlantic community. This deeply-rooted habit was not shaken even after Alaska and Hawaii joined the union and California overtook New York as the most populous state. In recent decades, the economic and cultural weight of Asia has become sufficient to change the global balance of power in many sectors, and the current economic crisis clearly reflects this trend. Many Asians including Koreans believe that Barack Obama’s election reflects a new American awareness for the United States as a bona fide Pacific nation. Now the American eagle could fly with two wings, Atlantic and Pacific, which will ensure both steady balance and global vision.

To be a truly effective member and leader of the Asia Pacific community, the United States needs a reliable ally right in the heart of the region. Given the geopolitical setting (mid-point in the China-Japan-Russia triangle) and the legacy of comrades-in-arms with the United States (Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan), Korea is one of the most obvious candidates for such a partnership. What prevented such a partnership from full maturation was partly the unwillingness and lack of
preparedness on the part of the United States to be fully engaged in the Asian neighborhood. But more significant were the obvious limits in the national capacity of Korea in economic and political spheres until recent decades. Having successfully achieved both industrialization and democratization, Korea has emerged in recent years as a prominent model for developing nations and as an aggressive newcomer among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Korea is finally ready to play a significant global and regional role, and therein lies the importance of the global strategic alliance that the Korean and the United States governments had officially announced last year.

There are a number of outstanding issues and challenges Korea and the United States must address together. The North Korean nuclear issue undoubtedly is the most immediate challenge. There are several dimensions involved in diagnosing the problem and devising a common strategy to deal with it effectively. The North Korean nuclear issue is part of a much larger global problem of nuclear proliferation. It is directly tied to the strategic balance between the two Koreas and among the concerned nations, namely the four powers surrounding the peninsula. Above all, it is a problem emanating from the peculiar nature of the North Korean system which is one of the more glaring exceptions to the global historic trend. To develop a comprehensive diagnosis of the problem and an effective common strategy to meet the challenge, Korea and the United States should engineer a new type of joint approach in which the North Korean nuclear issue is considered an important part of forging a new global and regional order. It will require fresh confidence and imagination on both sides, in Korea and the United States, and even greater mutual trust than has existed in the past.

Both the exigencies of the current economic crisis and the tremendous expectations attached to the leadership of President Obama could enable Korea and the United States to meet this challenge successfully as partners in a comprehensive alliance. At this critical juncture in world history, a truly effective bilateral alliance has to be an important part of a common effort to build both regional communities and a new global order for peace and prosperity. Korea aspires to live up to the vision of “Global Korea,” and this vision fits into the historic challenge the U.S.-ROK alliance is facing today. With South Korea positioned as a member of the troika guiding the G-20, the G-20 summit in London in April this year should be a great start for this new joint venture.

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NEWS & EVENTS

APRIL 13 • EAST-WEST CENTER, WASHINGTON, DC
CHINA’S RISE AND THE TWO KOREAS
Scott Snyder, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy Director and Senior Associate at The Asia Foundation, will discuss the findings of his new book, China’s Rise and the Two Koreas: Politics, Economics, Security, which explores the transformation of the Sino-South Korean relationship since the early 1990s. By assessing the strategic significance of recent developments in China’s relationship with both North and South Korea and the likely consequences for U.S. and Japanese influence in the region, this meticulous study lends important context to critical debates regarding China’s foreign policy, Northeast Asian security, and international relations more broadly.
To RSVP for this event, contact RSVPDC@EastWestCenter.org

MARCH 30 • UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES, CA
DEALING WITH NORTH KOREA’S HUMANITARIAN AND HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES: THE VARIETY OF APPROACHES
Sponsored by the USC Korean Studies Institute, this conference will feature presentations by Courtland Robinson, Johns Hopkins University; Scott Snyder, The Asia Foundation; and Rob Springs, Global Resource Services. Event details are available at: http://college.usc.edu/east_asian_studies/events/.

MARCH 9 • WILSON CENTER, WASHINGTON, DC
SOUTH KOREA VIEWS THE RISE OF CHINA
As in the United States, South Korean perspectives on China’s rise are complex. Many in the South Korean business community, for example, relish the opportunity to “hitch a ride” on Chinese economic growth. Yet perceptions that China is reclaiming its position as the lead nation in Asia call forth questions about South Korea’s national identity and its relations with others both within and beyond the region. This event dealt with the various perspectives within South Korea on China’s rise. Speakers, including Scott Snyder, The Asia Foundation; L. Gordon Flake, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation; Victor Cha, Georgetown University; and Samuel S. Kim, Columbia University; considered strategic and economic aspects of the relationship, as well as issues related to national identity. Event details are available at: www.wilsoncenter.org.

MARCH 2 • THE ASIA FOUNDATION, WASHINGTON, DC
DOES THE UNITED STATES NEED A NEW EAST ASIAN ANCHOR?: A CASE FOR U.S.-JAPAN-KOREA TRILATERALISM
Dr. Jongryn Mo, Professor of International Political
Economy at Yonsei University’s Graduate School of International Studies, provided an assessment of the U.S. position in East Asia based on possibilities of trilateral cooperation between the United States and its alliance partners, South Korea and Japan. His paper is available at: http://asiafoundation.org/publications/pdf/482.

FEBRUARY 17 • THE ASIA FOUNDATION, SEOUL, KOREA

PROSPECTS FOR DEEPENING THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE


PUBLICATIONS


Scott Snyder (February 12, 2009), “Smart Power: Remaking U.S. Foreign Policy in North Korea,” Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and the Global Environment, Washington, DC.


For a complete list of publications, please visit: www.centerforuskoreapolicy.org

VIEWS ON THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

“This is an enterprise in which the United States has a major role, but it is an enterprise which will not succeed unless we have the strong support of all of our allies and friends in the region.”

– Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, Special Representative for North Korea Policy, on U.S. engagement with North Korea, Washington, DC, February 26, 2009

“It is more than just a regional partnership; it is becoming a global strategic alliance that rests upon shared commitments and common values – democracy, human rights, market economies, and the pursuit of peace…Our partnership has already begun to look outward at the wide array of challenges and opportunities we face around the world, and will do so increasingly in the years to come.”

– Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in remarks with Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan, Seoul, Korea, February 20, 2009

“Through close consultations with the new Obama administration, we will endeavor to develop the ROK-U.S. alliance into a ‘21st Century Strategic Alliance’, strengthening mutual cooperation not only in the realm of security, but in the political, social, cultural and economic fields as well.”

– Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan in a speech at the Korea Foundation Forum, Seoul, Korea, February 18, 2009

“The U.S. and the ROK will continue to stand very close, shoulder to shoulder, and we’ll work together to see that our joint statement of September 2005 is finally fully realized.”

– Ambassador Christopher Hill at a press conference, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Seoul, Korea, February 15, 2009
The Center for U.S.-Korea Policy aims to deepen and broaden the foundations for institutionalized cooperation between the United States and South Korea by promoting bilateral policy coordination. A project of The Asia Foundation, the Center is based in the Foundation’s Washington, DC office. The Center supports the Foundation’s commitment to the development of the Asia Pacific by supporting a comprehensive U.S.-ROK alliance partnership on emerging global, regional, and non-traditional security challenges.

The Asia Foundation is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to the development of a peaceful, prosperous, just, and open Asia-Pacific region. Drawing on 50 years of experience in Asia, the Foundation collaborates with private and public partners to support leadership and institutional development, exchanges, and policy research.