Lee Myung-bak will visit the White House next week for his first summit meeting in Washington with Barack Obama. The meeting will be important for relations between South Korea and the United States and will influence East Asia’s regional order into the next decade. The main agenda items will include the fashioning of a vision statement for the U.S.-ROK strategic alliance for the 21st century; coordination of a policy response to North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile tests; South Korea’s assistance to the U.S.-led war on terror in Afghanistan; recovery from the global economic crisis; and the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. At the summit, the two presidents should pay special attention to two primary issues: North Korea’s nuclear weapons and support for the war on terror in Afghanistan.

After North Korea’s second nuclear test on May 25, the United Nations Security Council is busy discussing possible sanctions against North Korea. But relevant countries of the six-party talks have not yet fully understood the real meaning of North Korea’s missile and nuclear provocations. The DPRK’s foreign ministry statements from January 13 and 17 of this year made clear that the purpose of Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program is to defend itself from the U.S. hostile policy and nuclear threat toward the DPRK, not to solicit from the United States DPRK-U.S. normalization or American economic assistance. The DPRK spokesman asserted that North Korea is determined not to give up nuclear weapons even in the next 100 years unless the U.S. hostile policy and nuclear threat to the DPRK are fundamentally terminated. As long as the U.S.-DPRK relationship remains a hostile one, North Korea argues that mutual arms reduction negotiations provide the only option for realizing the nuclear disarmament of nuclear weapon states in the region.

North Korea’s official statements underscore two major points. First, if North Korea’s nuclear weapons have been developed as the ultimate means of defense of the current military-first leadership, it is impossible for the DPRK to give up its nuclear weapons. North Korea criticized the “carrot and stick policy” of the United States by asserting that it would be better for the “donkey” of the U.S. Democratic Party to lick the carrot.

Second, North Korea is proposing bilateral nuclear disarmament instead of unilateral denuclearization. To prepare for nuclear disarmament, North Korea wants to increase its nuclear capabilities as much as possible before beginning talks. In the next stage, North Korea will likely offer to reduce its nuclear capabilities simultaneously with the United States in the process of “action for action.” However, North Korea’s military-first leadership will not accept the final stage of nuclear disarmament because its unreasonable demands for security assurances cannot be realistically met.

Relevant countries in the six-party talks have failed to understand the meaning behind North Korea’s official statements regarding its second nuclear test. Until the final
moment, U.S. Special Envoy to North Korea Ambassador Stephen Bosworth consistently expressed his hope that North Korea would not conduct a nuclear test. At the upcoming U.S.-ROK summit, the two presidents should make common efforts to respond to the real intentions of North Korea. President Lee must point out that the logic of North Korea’s military-first policy is different from the American logic based on rationality.

Under the current military-first leadership in Pyongyang, a U.S. “carrot and stick policy” cannot effectively pressure North Korea to adopt a new goal of denuclearization. Thus Presidents Lee and Obama should candidly discuss a new approach to North Korea’s nuclear problem following the likely failure of UN-led sanctions. Considering the ineffectiveness of incentives and sanctions, we should encourage North Korea to adopt an economy-first policy of non-nuclearization instead of a military-first policy of nuclearization. Such a strategy requires a co-evolution of North Korea’s military-first leadership and international environments of stability and prosperity simultaneously.

North Korean leaders must come to realize that North Korea’s nuclear weapons as the ultimate defense of a military-first leadership will endanger the life of the North Korean people. On the other hand, North Korea’s opening and reform policy for the prosperity of their people will potentially throw down the military-first leadership. To solve this dilemma, North Korea should pursue a new type of leadership and a new opening and reform policy. South Korea should cooperate very closely with relevant countries including the United States and China to collectively support a new policy that would enable North Korea to become a successful state instead of a failed state in the 21st century.

With regard to Afghanistan, the Obama administration is concentrating its efforts thus far on a more inclusive solution following the failure of the military option. NATO now commands a 56,000-strong International Security Assistance Force, comprised of 41 countries including the United States, Britain, Germany and Canada. The Obama administration also seeks support from Asian allies including South Korea to stabilize Afghanistan's political, security, and economic situation. Obama will pay tribute to South Korea’s economic and political accomplishments, but he will also naturally expect Korea to play a global and regional role compatible with its national strength.

The United States and NATO are adjusting their new roles to new circumstances. Korea should accordingly review its global role. We must take into account inter-Korean relations and the tender roots of democracy in the South. The Korean peninsula is still militarily a little more stable than Afghanistan. But a rash transfer of South Korean troops or U.S. Forces in Korea could be dangerous. Securing of peace on the Korean peninsula also constitutes a contribution of international public goods in a regional and global context.

South Korean democracy is still in the early stages of establishing its legitimacy, and is vulnerable to strong criticism from opposition social forces within South Korea regarding the possible dispatch of combat forces to Afghanistan. The government has decided to expand support in Afghanistan from $30 million to $74.1 million until 2011 and to bolster the scale of its contribution of a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to Afghanistan. Considering the necessity of securing development in Afghanistan through
provision of PRTs, South Korea will focus on making its PRT effort successful given the domestic difficulties South Korea faces in sending combat troops.

In dealing with both the North Korean challenge and the stabilization of Afghanistan, the success of the ROK-U.S. summit depends on whether the two presidents can put themselves in each other’s shoes and fully grasp the difficulties that the other leader faces.

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