

KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

The Accidental Linchpin

By Victor Cha

On the sidelines of the recent G20 summit in Toronto, President Barack Obama emerged from his meeting with ROK president Lee Myung-bak with two major announcements: A new timetable for transfer of wartime operational command, and a personal commitment to move the KORUS free trade agreement forward. These are undeniably two very important policy deliverables for the alliance and kudos should be awarded to the Blue House and White House staffs for achieving these outcomes. But perhaps the most significant strategic statement came when Obama said that the US-ROK alliance was “the linchpin of not only security for the Republic of Korea and the United States but also for the Pacific as a whole...”

“Linchpin.” Historically, this has been a word used by Americans only to describe the U.S.-Japan alliance. In former Ambassador to Japan Mike Mansfield’s terms, this meant that U.S. policy in Asia started and ended with Tokyo, the closest ally in the Pacific. After Obama used these words to describe the relationship with Korea, Japanese officials went scurrying to the dictionary to see if linchpin could only be used in the singular (i.e., could there be more than one, or was Japan no longer the linchpin as well?)

The reasons for this new terminology for Korea are clear. It starts at the top. Obama, though widely loved around the world, has personally connected with only a few world leaders and Lee Myung-bak is one of his closest new friends. The friendship began in November 2009 during Obama’s difficult first trip through Asia. In Singapore, APEC leaders excoriated the new president for the lack of a trade policy. In Japan, prime minister Hatoyama started to rewrite the terms of the alliance. And in Beijing, Chinese leaders looked down on the young president and offered little in terms of cooperation on currency reform or climate change. Then Obama got to Seoul where, White House officials confide, Obama was delighted to have been hosted on a beautiful autumn day to a color guard on the Blue House lawn with smiling throngs of Korean school children waving American flags. Lee’s very warm and open social style contrasted with the otherwise formal demeanor of all the other Asian leaders Obama had encountered to that point. Moreover, Lee’s agenda – whether on climate change, counterproliferation, global financial recovery, Afghanistan, or disaster response – dovetailed with that of Obama. Afterwards, White House officials had no qualms about saying that Seoul was the “best stop” on the trip.

Obama’s opinion of Lee grew only more in the aftermath of the Cheonan sinking. There was admiration for Lee’s restrained and deliberate response to the torpedo attack despite strong public pressure for immediate retaliation. The level of coordination between

Washington and Seoul that developed in response to the Obama administration's first real military crisis in Asia appears to have fed a deep reservoir of trust to the point where the U.S. feels comfortable taking its lead from the ROK – a reversal of the traditional roles in the alliance. It is safe to say that the alliance currently is seeing its best days in quite some time. A far cry from the situation during Bush and Roh Moo-hyun where every transaction, every conversation was a difficult one.

It is also safe to say that this is purely accidental. If one had wagered a bet that the Obama's closest relationship in Asia half way through year 2 of the term would be South Korea, no one would have put money on the table. This is because Obama's unspoken strategy for Asia when he entered office was focused on an entirely different set of assumptions. In February 2009, Obama had three goals: 1) deep engagement with China; 2) steady alliance with Japan; and 3) high-level bilateral engagement to push the DPRK to more quickly implement the 2005 Six Party joint statement. The alliance with Seoul was important but it was not a major part of the strategy.

But each of these strategic paths was quickly impeded. China proved after the first year to be incapable of delivering cooperation on climate change, currency reform, and counterproliferation. Japan under Hatoyama quickly became the newest variable, not constant in Asia. And North Korea undertook missile and nuclear tests, slapping away U.S. efforts at bilateral engagement.

Meanwhile, South Korea proved to be one of the first economies out of the global financial crisis heeding U.S. calls for countries to push a strong fiscal stimulus package as the engine for recovery. In Afghanistan, NATO countries proved disappointing in supporting Obama's efforts while Seoul made the difficult decision to recommit forces. On climate change, the Lee government moved quickly to support green growth initiatives that dovetailed with the White House agenda at Copenhagen. Seoul also stepped up to play host to two major new global initiatives: the G20 summit and the Nuclear Summit.

This is not meant as a criticism of Obama or Lee. Presidencies are always about adjusting plans to unexpected developments. Seoul has adjusted well with the result being that it stands today and for the foreseeable future as the most important American partner in Asia.

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