



Asia Pacific Bulletin

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Number 260 | April 30, 2014

Obama's Visit to Korea: An Unwavering US-ROK Alliance Amidst Regional Tensions

BY STEPHANE MOT

President Barack Obama's fourth visit to Seoul, the first under Park Geun-hye's presidency, was unfortunately overshadowed by the tragic Sewol ferry sinking and growing tensions in Ukraine. One fact did emerge however, and that was the indispensability of the US-ROK alliance in Northeast Asia, along with the challenges ahead as the United States continues to implement its political and economic rebalance to Asia.

Stephane Mot, Independent Author and Blogger living in Seoul, explains that "Obama's visit did not change the opinion of the vast majority of South Koreans who consider the US-ROK alliance to be unequal, but it did further confirm the importance of South Korea for US engagement towards Asia."

By adding South Korea to Obama's Asian tour, the United States simultaneously delivered several important messages across the region. North Korea was informed that the US-ROK alliance grows even more resolute in opposition to the regime's nuclear program and human rights violations. China was reminded that the United States is a global superpower that will stand by its Asian Allies, and was once again invited to use its considerable influence to change Pyongyang's behavior. Russia was notified that its provocative and worrisome behavior toward Ukraine does not warrant it superpower status, and that the United States can still "walk and chew gum" at the same time and from on the other side of Eurasia. Most importantly, the message to South Korea and Japan was loud and clear, somewhat along the lines of "Dear friends, you are both important allies to the United States."

That last message is the kind that South Koreans love to hear. In a public opinion poll published just prior to Obama's visit, an Asan Institute survey confirmed that for South Koreans the United States is the most favored nation, Barack Obama the most favored leader, and the ROK-USA alliance an absolute and positive necessity. Regarding the South Korea-Japan relationship, 79% think that the US should play a role in improving relations, but 54% are dissatisfied with the current US role and 53% believe that the United States favors Japan more.

This survey also shows that many South Koreans believe, in the non-specific future, that China will replace the United States as the most influential global economy, and subsequently pose a serious challenge to US global leadership. The vast majority of South Koreans still prefer the US-led trilateral alliance structure (US-ROK-Japan) but there are serious concerns regarding long-term US influence in the region. Furthermore, historical issues continue to seriously undermine the Seoul-Tokyo bilateral relationship and the trilateral alliance as a whole. These factors in turn weaken America's overall position in Asia, and work to the advantage of Beijing.

Prior to his Asia trip, Obama demonstrated leadership when he orchestrated a trilateral meeting with Korean President Park Geun-hye and Japanese Prime Shinzo Abe on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague in late March. This meeting led to direct talks between South Korea and Japan on the key issue of Imperial Japan's exploitation of girls and women—many of whom were Korean—as sexual slaves, also known under the euphemism of "Comfort Women."

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Unlike territorial disputes, this subject is not about taking sides. Resolution of the sexual slaves issue would not only boost women’s rights worldwide, but also send a strong message rejecting historical revisionism and result in furthering reconciliation in Asia. Korea, furthermore, has long been waiting for a more vocal contribution from the US government on this matter, and did have one for a while from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Of course, Mrs. Clinton is no longer Secretary of State and Shinzo Abe’s words and actions since returning to power in 2012 continue to dismay many in Korea regarding the wrongdoings of Imperial Japan.

In Seoul, many perceived Obama’s visit to Tokyo as a submission to Abe’s agenda. Putting aside Obama’s comments on the Senkaku Islands that infuriated China, it was his support for Japan’s military development that concerned many South Koreans, especially as just prior to his visit 147 Japanese lawmakers visited Yasukuni Shrine. The point was not lost that Obama found time while in Tokyo to meet with the relatives of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea, whereas he has yet to meet with any of the last surviving Korean sex slave victims.

To Obama’s credit, he did address the issue of Imperial Japan’s exploitation of sex slaves at a joint press conference with President Park where he denounced the crimes in the strongest terms, and used more diplomatic language urging Japan to address these issues. The day after Obama’s departure from Seoul, Abe did make a declaration on this issue that in time may lead to something more substantial. Ultimately, Korea will not settle for anything less than a clear, unequivocal and binding apology repudiating Imperial Japan’s wrongdoings.

Likewise, the United States must reassure Asia that it will not condone Japanese historical revisionism, nor will it support an expanded Japanese military without providing wider safeguards to the region. Few outside of Japan believe Shinzo Abe, an advocate of textbook revisionism who last year said that Imperial Japan did not invade its neighbors, to now deliver a fair reinterpretation of the Japanese constitution on military matters. Many South Koreans expect the United States to stand firm on the principles of human rights, which would result in a peaceful and democratic Japan that acknowledges its past atrocities.

Both President Obama and President Park were univocal on North Korea—its nuclear weapons program, human rights violations, and reunification—and they also agreed to “reconsider” the 2015 target for the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON). Obama visited the National Korean War Memorial, the Combined Forces Command with President Park, and the US military garrison at Yongsan, all without any disruption from Pyongyang. The most the regime could do was announce that it had detained one more US citizen.

Overall, Obama’s visit confirmed the crucial role of South Korea in his “rebalancing” Asian tour. Even though there were no major breakthroughs or announcements, his brief trip revealed an alliance that is in good shape with high levels of mutual understanding and cooperation. Discussions with Park Geun-hye took longer than scheduled—in sharp contrast with those with Shinzo Abe—and appear to reflect how comfortable both leaders are with each other. On the economic front, Obama pushed for the full implementation the two-year-old KORUS Free Trade Agreement, a priority for US-ROK relations. There was less public discussion of Korea joining any Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations; perhaps in part because the United States and Japan did not announce successful conclusion of discussions on President Obama’s earlier stop in Tokyo.

The short, busy visit was carefully scripted, and in a respectful way. Koreans welcomed Obama’s sincere and graceful condolences regarding the Sewol tragedy and his “no-drama” persona portrayed him as a compassionate “captain” in full control. In summary, Obama’s visit did not change the opinion of the vast majority of South Koreans who consider the US-ROK alliance to be unequal, but it did further confirm the importance of South Korea for US engagement towards Asia.

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington.

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