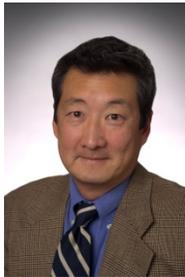


KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

Unfinished Business*

By Victor Cha
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Although the full itinerary of President Obama's scheduled trip to Asia in April has not yet been formally announced, the Washington inside-the-beltway experts believe that Japan is a definite stop. A stop in the Philippines, after Typhoon Haiyan, is also likely, and then possibly Indonesia or Malaysia. Noticeably absent from this itinerary is Korea or China, but in the latter case, Obama will already be headed to Beijing for APEC in the fall of 2014.

So what about Korea? It would be a slap in the face of President Park if Obama did not stop in Korea on his April trip. To skip a key ally (while visiting two others), and at a time when Japan-ROK relations are so bad and the North Korean threat is so imminent, would be truly unthinkable. Woody Allen, the famous American filmmaker, said that 80 percent of life is just showing up. President Obama needs to show up in Korea. Republican Senator Marco Rubio of Florida seems to understand this logic. The rising star in the U.S. Senate is a member of the influential foreign relations committee and is making his first trip to Asia this week. His three stops are Japan, Philippines, and Korea – three key U.S. allies in the region.

Should President Obama decide to go to Korea in April, there is much work to be done. Indeed, as we start 2014, both the Park and Obama administrations must be cognizant of the dangers associated with allowing the U.S.-ROK alliance to drift on "auto-pilot." This is not acceptable precisely because there is a great deal of "unfinished business" in the relationship that was not concluded in 2012 or 2013.

For example, the two countries finally reached a new Special Measures Agreement (SMA) on host nation support this month in which Seoul has agreed to increase its annual contributions (approximately \$866 million) to the costs of U.S. forces and based in Korea. Given the questions about transparency of past funds contributed by the Korean government to the U.S. military, this new SMA accord will be heavily scrutinized by the National Assembly. It is

critical that the Park government create the right environment to ensure support for the new accord as a continued sign of strength in the alliance.

The so-called 1-2-3 negotiations between the United States and the ROK is another piece of unfinished business. The two sides must create a new civil nuclear cooperation agreement as the old one has expired. Seoul demands the right to enrich uranium on the front end of the fuel cycle, and to reprocess spent nuclear fuel on the back-end of the fuel cycle. Washington believes enriched uranium fuel is plentiful enough on the open market for the ROK to acquire. The non-proliferation community in DC is also concerned about possible nuclear proliferation resulting from Seoul's having a full nuclear fuel cycle. No progress has been made on these negotiations despite a last-minute agreement to extend the current accord by two years. But time is running out.

Another piece of unfinished business is the transfer of wartime operational control or OPCON. The U.S. and South Korea agreed that wartime OPCON would be transitioned to the ROK by 2015. But the Park government wants to delay the handover given concerns about the North Korea threat. This would be the second time Korea has asked for a delay and some Americans, including former USFK commander Skip Sharp believe that we should stick to the 2015 timeline. The absence of consensus on this issue creates strategic uncertainty.

Finally, there is Korea's interest in joining the Transpacific Partnership. Seoul would likely be the first major economy to "dock" onto TPP in the second phase of the agreement (that is, after the initial framework agreement is reached among the charter members).

Should President Obama visit Korea in April, this would most likely be in the aftermath of some North Korean provocation, whether this is a nuclear test, missile shot, or conventional provocation. So, there will be a pressing need to give a strong show of alliance unity and deterrence.

Summits are action-forcing events. What this means if the two governments know their leaders are going to meet in April, this creates a great deal of frenetic activity to try to achieve agreements in order to provide the two leaders with policy deliverables for their meeting. In this regard, Obama's visit to Korea in April would provide an opportunity to wrap up a lot of unfinished business in the US-ROK alliance.

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