

It's All in the Golf Cart: President of the Republic of Korea, Lee Myung-bak, Visits the United States

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For Korea watchers—and particularly for those of us who worked closely on events associated with President Lee's visit to Washington—April was a very rewarding month. After multiple protocol meetings, site visits, and many other preparations, the events of the week went smoothly, culminating in President Lee's historic visit to Camp David for a summit with President George W. Bush. The first ever visit to Camp David by a Korean president was, by all accounts, a rousing success.

In the weeks leading up to the visit, there was a great deal of speculation about the issues that the two leaders would discuss, as well as the major points that President Lee would touch upon during his other meetings scheduled in New York and Washington April 14–19. When the GNP secured a narrow absolute majority in the parliamentary elections of April 9, the Lee administration was given a renewed mandate to enact some of its major policy goals: reviving the Korean economy; adjusting relations with North Korea; ratifying the KORUS FTA; and enhancing the U.S.-ROK alliance. Each of these issues was at the forefront of his visit to the United States.

In the parliamentary election, the GNP—its own support reduced by the fact that some of its candidates left the party to become members of the “Pro-Park Geun-Hye Alliance”—won more narrowly than expected. With a record low turnout of only 46% of the 37.7 million voters, the GNP won 153 of 299 available seats, with the main opposition United Democratic Party taking 81 seats, and 58 seats going to pro-Park candidates (including 26 who officially resigned from the GNP). While this gave the new Lee administration the legitimacy needed to govern and move its platform forward, it was not by the large majority that polls and pundits predicted.

President Lee traveled to the United States amidst a great deal of North Korean saber-rattling and name-calling, to which he responded that the North should, “move away from its previous ways and actions.” In an editorial following the visit, Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan said that President Bush supported President Lee's plan of “denuclearization, opening, 3000,” entailing denuclearization of the peninsula, the eventual opening of diplomatic relations, and increasing the per capita GDP of North Korean citizens to \$3000. President Lee reiterated his desire to generally improve the way of life for ordinary North Korean citizens, and he and President Bush agreed that they would be patient during the ongoing process of denuclearizing the North. In an interview with the *Washington Post* during his visit, President Lee introduced the notion of setting up liaison offices in Pyongyang and Seoul, an idea which has since been rejected by Pyongyang. His visit also occurred at a pivotal time in the U.S.-Korea trade relationship, in particular with regard to the ratification of the KORUS FTA. President Lee said, in the interview with the *Washington Post*, that “ratification will help American consumers because [the agreement] will help American companies to use Korea as a strategic bridgehead into East Asian markets.” Despite this argument, the FTA still faces a great deal of opposition in politics and Congress generally. Congressman Ed Royce was quoted as saying that President Lee's visit was important “in order to build additional momentum” on the passage of the FTA through Congress. During the visit, President Lee lifted the controversial ban on U.S. beef, allowing President Bush to pledge his support during the summit meeting, and both leaders to stand side-by-side in advocacy for this historic trade agreement.

President Lee's schedule for the visit also included meetings on issues of military, social, cultural, and educational importance to the bilateral relationship between the United States and Korea. He met with prominent Korean-Americans, with American business leaders to encourage foreign investment and to support Korea's move toward becoming a financial hub, and, in Washington, with a number of Korea-watchers and think-tank experts. With regard to the military alliance, presidents Lee and Bush determined that the current troop levels will be maintained in the immediate future, but that the timeline for wartime operational control transfer will remain the same. The two leaders pledged to mutually support each other's efforts to combat terror and weapons of mass destruction, in addition to specifically not condoning a nuclear-armed North Korea. In addition, they agreed to support the elevation of Korea's Foreign Military Sales status to the top category, which currently includes the NATO member states, plus Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Concerning issues of importance in the social, cultural and educational arenas, the most important outcome of the visit was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan and U.S. Homeland Security Chief Michael Chertoff, indicating that both parties would do everything they could, by year's end, to include Korea in the Visa Waiver Program. The two leaders also recognized the importance of cross-cultural exchange, and they pledged to support organizations that “enhance cooperation in the academic and human exchange fields.”

The two presidents pledged to further define the strategic alliance and to announce their plan of action at the next Korea-U.S. summit, to take place in Seoul this July. The symbol that has been most often used to reflect the success of the visit was the moment at Camp David when President Lee took the wheel of Golf Cart 1 and drove while President Bush narrated an historical tour of the facility. This event, uncharacteristic of President Bush, according to officials from the Korean government, illustrates the mutual trust and affinity that the two leaders have for each other and that will now serve as the basis for the U.S.-ROK alliance. It is, in fact, all in the golf cart.