

Reintroducing Allies: U.S.-ROK Legislative Exchanges

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In recent months there has been a steady stream of delegations from the Korean National Assembly visiting Washington, D.C. This is both a welcome and warranted development. As a country that has often perceived itself as the United States's "closest" ally in Asia, Korea has long enjoyed strong relations with the U.S. at the legislative level. However, in recent years there has been a noticeable decline in inter-parliamentary, and in Washington's familiarity with Korea's legislative branch. Part of this is certainly a result of changes in Washington in a post-9/11 world. Korea itself has been much more inward focused in recent years. Most striking, however, have been the dramatic changes in the Korean National Assembly itself.

Washington watched with both admiration and amazement the democratic, if somewhat unsettling, elections in April of 2004 that led to a Korean National Assembly in which nearly 80 percent of the members had served one term or less. The typical response in Washington to this development is mirrored by my own personal experience. In nearly 20 years of working on Korea issues, I have regularly dealt with counterparts who were on average 20-30 years my senior. Recent changes in Korea have swept in a new generation of leaders who, while my peers in age, remained largely unknown to me, and I to them. As a result, I have only somewhat jokingly taken to proclaiming myself no longer a Korea specialist.

All this is to say, it is absolutely imperative that the new generation of political leaders in Korea forge new personal relationships with their counterparts in Washington, and vice versa. Unfortunately, the traditional model of Korean National Assembly delegations, which often emphasize style over substance and form over function, may not be sufficient to meet this need.

From my own observations, the overwhelming majority of National Assembly delegations still fall into several traps. They are often more concerned with photo-ops with big names than establishing relationships, more concerned with understanding what Washington thinks about Korea than in understanding how Washington works, and more concerned with conveying the official Korean line than in establishing relationships of trust. These tendencies are particularly problematic now that the issue of North Korea, which once used to unite us as allies, has become one of our greatest areas of divergence.

Despite such divergence, delegation after delegation stresses that the U.S.-ROK alliance is strong, that there is no daylight between the U.S. and ROK positions, that anti-Americanism in Korea is exaggerated, and in short, that there is nothing to worry about. The words of Shakespeare's Hamlet to his queen appear appropriate: "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." Koreans are often known for their bluntness, and Washington, particularly an administration that would nominate the likes of John Bolton to be ambassador to the UN, clearly prefers straight talk.

National Assembly delegations would also do well to expose to a trusted ally the deep debates that are ongoing in Seoul. One recent delegation crowed about the historic elections last April,

how they were the most free and democratic ever, serving to check the power of the South Korean presidency. The delegation then proceeded to act as mouthpiece for the Blue House and their remarks might as well have been delivered by the Korean ambassador. Of course this is not to say that National Assembly delegations are expected to undermine Korean government policy while abroad, especially since most recent delegations have been multi-partisan in representation. However, while the U.S. has a declining tradition that partisanship ends at our nation's borders, this never meant that Congress demurs to the White House on all issues. For example, while the Korean government's timidity on the issue of human rights in North Korea is marginally understandable given the objectives of Korean government policy, one would think that, freed from the bonds of enacting foreign policy, the National Assembly might be able to provide a clear voice to the conscience of the Korean people.

In the belief that there is no substitute for direct contact and in the sincere hope that the flow of legislative delegations between Korea and the U.S. will continue, I offer a few points of advice:

-Keep it consistent: Delegations should resist the urge to tell U.S. audiences only what they think the U.S. wants to hear. This is particularly a problem when presentations made in Washington are inconsistent with comments made in Seoul. In this information age, what is said in Seoul makes it way back here with surprising rapidity, and such inconsistency undermines trust.

-Conceptualize and deliver an independent National Assembly perspective: Even taking partisanship into account, Americans are accustomed to and would likely welcome diverse perspectives from the legislative and executive branches in Korea.

-Broaden the scope of our dialogue: The always sexy issue of North Korea almost inevitably dominates most Korea discussions. Delegations should come prepared to discuss and advocate that greater attention be paid to our broader relationship.

-Move beyond the "photo-op" to understand how Washington works: The more substantive meetings that can be held beyond the ring of top government officials and the small circle of Korea specialists, the better. The media, lobbyists, business, academics, nonprofits, grassroots organizations, and many other factors all greatly influence U.S. policy.

-Don't just send "barbarian handlers"; focus less on preaching to the converted: As important as it is for senior leaders from Korea to visit the U.S., in the long run it is far more important for those legislators who haven't been to the U.S., who don't speak English, or even who are sharply opposed to U.S. policy to visit Washington and begin the long process of ensuring that this special relationship continues.