

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

South Korean President Lee Myung-bak's Upcoming Visit to the United States

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Q1: What is the context of President Lee Myung-bak's upcoming visit?

A1: President Lee's visit to Washington will be his first since being inaugurated in February as South Korea's fifth popularly elected president since the country's democratic transition in 1988. President Lee, who is elected to one five-year term, comes to town representing the return in South Korea of traditional conservative leadership. As such, he will seek to send an unequivocal signal that the difficulties and mistrust that marked U.S.–South Korea relations over the past five years during the Roh Moo-hyun administration, which seemed to distance itself from the alliance with thinly veiled references to pursuing an “independent foreign policy,” are behind us. Indeed, President Lee has been explicit in his desire to reaffirm the importance of the U.S.–South Korea alliance to his country and his intention to find ways to revitalize and deepen the relationship for a new, post–Cold War era. President Lee's visit comes as the United States and North Korea are working out the details to complete the second phase of the February 13, 2007, Six-Party Talks denuclearization agreement and as the U.S.–South Korea free-trade agreement (KORUS FTA) languishes in the legislatures of both Seoul and Washington. President Lee has sent much firmer signals to North Korea that the South's aid and investment will not be without conditions, in particular tied to progress in nuclear disarmament talks and to reciprocal gestures of good will toward the South.

Q2: What should one expect to be discussed during President Lee's visit?

A2: The pinnacle of President Lee's trip will be a Camp David sleepover, the first such opportunity for a Korean president, which is meant to symbolize the heightened importance the United States places on the U.S.–South Korea relationship and on the fresh start offered by President Lee himself after many years of U.S. frustration with his predecessor. The two leaders will lay markers in the alliance by affirming continued implementation of agreements (reached under President Roh) to reduce and realign U.S. forces based on the peninsula and to transfer operational control of South Korean forces during wartime from the United States to South Korea by 2012. Although the Lee administration has privately registered concern about the latter agreement, it is extremely unlikely President Lee will express any reservations during this visit due to the Bush administration's strong commitment to the move. The two leaders will affirm their common approach to North Korean denuclearization through the Six-Party Talks; one should expect no space to appear between the two leaders on the issue, although President Lee will likely affirm his commitment to building bridges with the North under appropriate circumstances given his people's desires on this front. Finally, the two leaders will recommit themselves to passing the KORUS FTA, which will likely result in a strong public statement of support for the deal as a strategic issue critical not only for respective economic interests but also as an essential element of a revitalized and comprehensive alliance for a new era.

Q3: What would be measures of a successful visit? An unsuccessful visit?

A3: Given the value of symbolism in summit meetings, particularly those involving new leaders, President Lee's visit may already be counted as a success due to his Camp David stopover. Beyond that, there is unlikely to be any great deliverable from the visit. From the U.S. perspective, particularly on Capitol Hill, a commitment from President Lee that South Korea's legislature will allow U.S. beef into South Korea (restricted following the recent mad cow disease scare) and open its market wider to the U.S. automobile sector will be most welcome. From President Lee's perspective, a clear U.S. commitment to include South Korea in the visa waiver program by the end of the year—an issue with great symbolic and emotional importance to the Korean people as a sign of trust and respect—will be considered a substantial achievement. The visit's timing in the waning months of an unpopular U.S. administration, however, will likely lead President Lee to measure the success of his trip in broader terms. He is clearly looking beyond the current U.S. president during this trip to try to connect with a broader section of U.S. society, particularly the U.S. Congress (despite failing in his attempt to address a joint session of Congress), potential members of a new U.S. administration in 2009, the media, and other interested U.S. citizens to affirm that South Korea is back as a trusted ally and friend. Indeed, President Lee has saved the hard work for a new president. This includes the need for a new vision for the alliance through a bilateral public declaration, a product on the minds of many elites in both South Korea and the United States. President Lee's upcoming visit is meant to lay the groundwork for that day.

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