

- [MAIN STREET](#), WALL STREET JOURNAL
- SEPTEMBER 19, 2011, 7:52 P.M. ET

Presidential Seoul-Searching

Another ally is embarrassed by Obama's domestic priorities.

By WILLIAM MCGURN

In American political life, there exists no surer sign that a key relationship is in trouble than when the White House declares the "bonds of friendship" stronger than ever.

Thus spoke President Obama in Warsaw earlier this year, when he told the Poles "that the relationship between our two countries has never been stronger"—notwithstanding his decision to pull out a missile shield for their nation.

Thus spoke President Obama in London, when he told the British that the "special relationship" is "stronger than it's ever been"—notwithstanding the thinly disguised contempt with which he has treated British leaders.

Thus too did the president assure Benjamin Netanyahu that "the extraordinarily close relationship between the United States and Israel is sound and will continue"—notwithstanding that relations between our nations are arguably the lowest they've ever been.

Now the South Koreans have joined this unlucky camp. In announcing a state visit to Washington in October by President Lee Myung-bak, the White House added that this visit will highlight "the deep economic ties" and celebrate "the deep bonds of friendship" between the U.S. and Korea." Alarm bells should be sounding throughout Seoul.

Certainly Mr. Lee's visit will "highlight" economic ties, though perhaps not in the way the White House supposes. Korea is an important ally and America's eighth-largest trading partner. As the administration's own trade office notes about the pending free-trade agreement, "America's economic output will grow more from the U.S.-South Korea agreement than from the United States' last nine trade agreements combined."

That's another way of saying that the economic stakes are high. The political ones may be even higher. In the Korean press, for example, there is talk about a Lee address to a joint session of Congress. So the question is this: Will Mr. Lee finally return home with a deal, or will the high-profile visit only highlight Mr. Obama's inability to deliver?

For Mr. Lee, it must be wearying. In the course of a year, he bumps into Mr. Obama several times: at the G-20 meeting, at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, at bilateral meetings in Washington and Seoul, and so on. In fact, within a month after his upcoming visit to Washington, Mr. Lee will see President Obama at the G-20 in Cannes and the APEC summit in Honolulu. If the U.S. and Korea still do not have a deal done by then, folks will notice.

They know Mr. Obama could have sent the U.S.-Korea agreement to Congress for a vote on his first day in office. And they have learned that this is a man who uses America's foreign friends to grind domestic axes.



AFP/Getty Images

South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak speaks to President Obama at the G20 Summit in Seoul in November.

Look what's happening in Congress. Yesterday in the Senate, Majority Leader Harry Reid held a cloture vote that paves the way for trade adjustment assistance, the tribute that we pay unions to get trade deals through. In the House, by contrast, they don't want to pass trade assistance until Congress has approved all three of the outstanding trade pacts: with Korea, Columbia and Panama. This is not as insurmountable as it looks, because Sen. Reid knows that he can trust House Speaker John Boehner to get trade assistance through the House if the Senate goes ahead and okays the trade deals.

The only thing holding up the show is Mr. Obama. By insisting that Congress do trade assistance first, he's inserted himself into a legislative process the leaders could otherwise resolve on their own. House Republicans simply will not pass trade assistance first, out of well-founded fear that the president will respond by continuing to stall on the trade pacts—or, more likely, by sending them up but with only tepid support, putting final passage in jeopardy and leaving the Colombians twisting in the wind.

Maybe that helps explain why—three years into his first term—Mr. Obama's trade policy consists almost entirely of three trade deals his predecessor had already negotiated, and three weeks before Mr. Lee's arrival the White House has still not sent the appropriate legislation on Korea up to Capitol Hill. Ironically, this presidential dithering comes at a time when these trade deals should be more attractive, given that the growing economies they represent would be healthy markets for our exports.

Korea's economy, for example, is growing at an annual rate of more than 4%. Colombia's is growing at more than 5%, and Panama's is growing at more than 6%. Like the rest of the world, moreover, these nations are not standing still for Mr. Obama: Last week, for example, the Koreans and Colombians announced a bilateral free-trade agreement they expect to be done by year's end.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. When candidate Barack Obama went to Berlin in July 2008, his promise to the "people of the world" was that he would restore wisdom and sophistication to American leadership. When Mr. Lee shows up in Washington, it might be worth asking how he thinks it has turned out.

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