

## **American Presidential Election and Korea**

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The results of the presidential election in the United States, scheduled to be held on November 2, will help shape Washington's domestic and foreign policies alike for the next four years. How, then, will U.S. policy toward the Korean peninsula be affected by who wins the election? Will the re-election of George W. Bush herald the continuation of the policies his administration has pursued during the past four years? Will the victory of his opponent, Senator John Kerry, usher in a period of change in America's Korea policy?

Before embarking on a brief speculative excursion, we need to keep in mind that there are so many variables in the equation that no one can claim to have a crystal ball. Simply put, notwithstanding the "imperial" nature of the American presidency, its incumbent can seldom make policy alone. The members of the policy-making team he assembles, their predilections, expertise, and the extent to which their views coincide or conflict, will have a huge impact on what kind of policy will be adopted. No less important will be sudden, unanticipated external events. Since it is highly unlikely, for example, that should he be re-elected, Bush will keep his foreign and security policy team intact, there is no iron-clad guarantee that the second Bush administration will replicate all the key aspects of the current Korea policy.

With these caveats in mind, however, our starting point will be the Bush administration's record thus far. Focusing on its policy toward North Korea, one can see that it has not remained consistent, at least at the tactical level. Take the issue of how to deal with the North's nuclear threat, which surfaced anew in October 2002 following the revelations about Pyongyang's covert program to develop nuclear weapons utilizing highly-enriched uranium (HEU). Washington's initial position was to refuse to talk with the North until and unless the latter dismantles the HEU program first. The Bush administration argued that it would never engage in dialogue with and offer concessions to the North, for that would be tantamount to "rewarding bad behavior." In Washington's view, by covertly pursuing the HEU program Pyongyang had clearly violated three international agreements, namely, the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), the inter-Korean agreement on the denuclearization of the peninsula, and the Agreed Framework (AF). What the Bush administration did instead was to penalize the North by suspending the delivery of heavy fuel oil (HFO), of which 500,000 metric tons per year had been supplied to the North as stipulated by the AF. Pyongyang retaliated by expelling

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitors from Yongbyon, dismantling or disabling all monitoring devices there, removing 8,000 spent fuel rods from IAEA-monitored canisters, and withdrawing from the NPT.

Then in early 2003 the Bush administration indicated a willingness to engage in talks with the North in order to break the impasse, provided they occur in a multilateral framework. The gap between the positions of Pyongyang and Washington thus was narrowed considerably—from whether or when talks could begin to the mere format of talks, with Pyongyang insisting on bilateral talks and Washington adhering to a multilateral format. With China's active mediation, the gap was finally bridged in March 2002, when trilateral talks involving the U.S., North Korea, and China were held in Beijing. Finally, in August of the same year, six-party talks, with South Korea, Japan, and Russia added to the list, materialized. What made this breakthrough possible was a tacit understanding that informal bilateral contacts would occur on the sidelines of six-party talks. The same understanding, in fact, had preceded the trilateral talks, which the North took pains to label DPRK-U.S. talks (*chomi hoedam*).

The three rounds of six-party talks that have been held thus far, however, have not produced any tangible results. What is notable nonetheless is change in U.S. behavior in the talks. At the third round, held in Beijing in June 2004, the U.S. displayed a little more flexibility than it had in the first two rounds. The U.S. indicated that should the North meet certain conditions—notably, fully disclosing its nuclear activities, submitting to inspections, and pledging to begin eliminating nuclear programs after a “preparatory period of three months,”—it would provide a “provisional security assurance” to Pyongyang, lift some sanctions, and allow the other participants in the six-party talks to provide HFO and other energy assistance to the North.

Several developments—notably Bush's reference to Kim Jong Il as a “tyrant,” the passage by the U.S. Congress of the North Korean Human Rights Act, and the disclosure that South Korean scientists had produced small amounts of weapons-grade plutonium and HEU on an experimental basis—led to a North Korean decision to oppose the convening of a fourth round of the six-party talks, which the participants had agreed in principle to hold by the end of September. Pyongyang may also be playing a waiting game—to see which candidate wins the presidential election.

What can the North hope to gain from the waiting game? Would Kerry's victory prove to be more advantageous to Pyongyang? North Korea has indeed emerged as an issue in the American presidential race. It was a point of contention in the first televised debate between Bush and Kerry on September 31. In response to the question, “do you believe

that diplomacy and sanctions can resolve the nuclear problems with North Korea...?” Bush stated that since the North had failed to honor the Agreed Framework, a product of bilateral negotiations between it and the Bill Clinton administration, he “decided that a better way to approach the issue was to get other nations involved, just besides us.”

“In Crawford, Tex,” Bush continued, “Jiang Zemin and I agreed that...a nuclear-weapons-free [Korean] peninsula was in his interest and our interest and the world’s interest. So we began a new dialogue with North Korea, one that included not only the United States but now China. And China’s got a lot of influence over North Korea... As well we included South Korea, Japan and Russia. So now there are five voices speaking to Kim Jong Il, not just one. And so if Kim Jong Il decides again to not honor an agreement he’s not only doing injustice to America, but doing injustice to China as well.” Bush expressed confidence that “this will work,” adding that “it’s not going to work if we open up a dialogue with Kim Jong Il. That’s what he wants. He wants to unravel the six-party talks or the five-nation coalition that’s sending him a clear message.”

Kerry, on the other hand, offered what he called the “real story” as follows:

“We had inspectors and television cameras in the nuclear reactor in North Korea. Secretary Bill Perry [sic] negotiated that under President Clinton. And we knew where the fuel rods were. And we knew the limits on their nuclear power. Colin Powell, our secretary of state, announced one day that we are going to continue the dialogue and work with North Koreans. The president reversed him, publicly, while the president of South Korea was here. And the president of South Korea went back to South Korea bewildered and embarrassed because it went against his policy. And for two years, this administration didn’t talk at all to North Korea. While they didn’t talk at all, the fuel rods came out, the inspectors were kicked out, the television cameras were kicked out and today there are four to seven nuclear weapons in the hands of North Korea. That happened on this president’s watch. Now that, I think, is one of the most serious sort of reversals or mixed messages that you could possibly send.”

Although he would be prepared to engage in both multilateral and bilateral talks, Kerry placed more emphasis on the latter. In his words, “I want bilateral talks which put all of the issues from the armistice of 1952 [sic], the economic issues, the human rights issue, the artillery disposal issue, the D.M.Z. issues and the nuclear issue on the table.”

Let us pause here to assess Kerry’s critique of Bush’s handling of the North Korean nuclear issue. While it is true that the freeze of North Korea’s plutonium-based nuclear program unraveled during “Bush’s watch,” the absence of dialogue cannot be described as the main cause of what has happened. What the North actually did was to use a

familiar weapon in its tactical arsenal: “tit for tat.” For it had waited until the U.S.—or the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), to be technically precise—decided in November 2002 to stop delivery of HFO before taking retaliatory measures. With the benefit of hindsight, one can argue that the U.S. and its allies may have made a tactical error. If one assumes that the North might not have terminated the IAEA-monitored freeze of its Yongbyon facilities and withdrawn from the NPT had the U.S. not suspended its HFO delivery, then the U.S. has arguably paid a steep price for its punitive action aimed at the North. If, moreover, the North has indeed managed to produce “four to seven” or even one or two nuclear weapons, presumably with plutonium extracted from the spent fuel rods that were freed from IAEA monitoring, then the magnitude of the Bush administration’s tactical blunder becomes even more disturbing.

Turning to Kerry’s declared intention to conduct bilateral talks with the North, one may ask whether that will turn out to be more efficacious than Bush’s approach. Will the North be able to strike a better bargain from its standpoint? What of the U.S. and its allies? Two things are noteworthy regarding Kerry’s position. First, Kerry has made clear that preventing nuclear proliferation will receive the highest priority on his administration’s agenda. This means that his strategic objective vis-à-vis North Korea will be no different from Bush’s—namely, a complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of the North’s nuclear weapons program. It is noteworthy in this connection that many of the people who are being mentioned as possible candidates for foreign policy and security-related appointments in a Kerry administration have credentials as proliferation specialists. Second, as noted above, the agenda of the bilateral talks with the North Kerry has in mind are comprehensive, including “all of the issues” from the armistice, economic and humanitarian issues, conventional arms and deployment, and nuclear weapons. The North, which has loudly condemned the North Korean Human Rights Act as a transparent tool with which the U.S. is scheming to hasten “regime change” in Pyongyang, is certain to resist discussion of any humanitarian issues other than food, medical, and other assistance. In a word, the Kerry approach may not necessarily spell more benefits and advantages for the North.

Should Bush be re-elected, that would not ipso facto translate into the continuation of the current approach to the North Korean nuclear issue, with the notable exception of CVID. At the tactical level, depending on who gets appointed to key foreign and security policy-related positions, the second Bush administration may well adopt a harder line than its predecessor. It is, for example, widely speculated that Colin Powell may not continue as the secretary of state. Should that turn out to be the case, the most important moderate voice in the Bush administration will be gone. If the North, for its part, refuses to

change its stance—for example, its denial of the existence of an HEU program—no one can rule out the possibility that the six-party talks will break down altogether. Referral of the North Korean nuclear issue to the United Nations Security Council, the imposition of sanctions, either with or without the imprimatur of UN approval, and forcible interdiction of ships and airplanes bound for or originating from North Korea—for which the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) is already in place—these are some of the scenarios one can readily envision. The extreme option—“surgical or preemptive” strikes against suspected nuclear installations in the North—, however, has but a low probability of being used due to several reasons: one, given the certainty of North Korean counter-attack, the cost is unacceptably high; two, the Iraq experience and quagmire operate as severe constraints on the use of military force in Korea; and three, some of the targets, notably HEU facilities, remain invisible and most probably widely scattered.

In sum, judging from the words and, in the case of George W. Bush, deeds of the two main candidates in the American presidential race, the identity of the victor on November 2 will likely produce but marginal change in Washington’s policy toward Pyongyang. The goal of CVID will remain intact but tactical change in terms of negotiating—or not negotiating—with the North is highly probable.

Needless to say, there are other issues in U.S.-Korea relations than the North Korean nuclear threat. To cite just a few, reduction and redeployment of U.S. troops in the South and trade and economic issues—such as the conclusion of a bilateral investment treaty and, possibly, a free trade agreement—come to mind. These issues, however, are exceedingly unlikely to be affected by the outcome of the November 2 election, for no discernible differences between the two candidates can be identified.