

U.S. Policy Toward the Korean Peninsula In Bush's Second Term

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Not only did the solid victory of George W. Bush in the U.S. presidential election on November 2 earn him a second term--something that had eluded his father--but it also ensures that continuity will eclipse change in his foreign policy in the next four years. This implies, of course, that there will inevitably be changes, large and small, in the substance and style of U.S. policy. What, then, will the second Bush administration's policy toward the Korean peninsula look like?

It is perhaps premature to engage in an arm-chair speculation of this kind without knowing whether any change is in the offing in the composition of the foreign and security policy team in the second Bush term cabinet. Would the ascendancy of the so-called "neocons" continue to be restrained somewhat by the "moderate" faction headed by Colin Powell? Or would such checks and balances disappear from the policy-making arena altogether? Having received a clear-cut majority in the popular vote--an impressive three and a half million margin over his opponent--Bush may well see his overall policy, both domestic and foreign, vindicated and may not be inclined to change the general direction of his foreign policy. A major factor in molding a second-term Bush administration's Korea policy, however, will be the behavior of North Korea, something over which Washington has but limited control.

Continuity

If there is one thing that can be said with a high degree of confidence about U.S. policy toward the Korean peninsula in a second Bush term, it is that the perceived threat of nuclear proliferation emanating from North Korea will receive a top priority. What is more, the principal means with which Washington will tackle this challenge will remain six-party talks. All of the parties in the talks except North Korea have already made plain their determination to jump-start the stalled talks. If, as was widely assumed, Pyongyang's refusal to allow a fourth round of the talks to be held in September owed in part to its wish to wait for the outcome of the U.S. presidential election, then the North may no longer find it expedient to drag its feet.

There are, however, other factors in the equation, and inducing Pyongyang back to the multilateral negotiating table will require concerted efforts by the other five parties. Officially, the North has steadfastly called on the U.S. to jettison what Pyongyang calls a

“hostile” policy aimed at toppling the DPRK. The North wants the repeal of the recently-enacted North Korean Human Rights Act, which authorizes an expenditure of up to \$24 million a year for assisting humanitarian groups that help refugees from North Korea and which empowers Bush to name a special envoy on North Korean human-rights issues. The North has also called on the U.S. to participate in a compensation package in return for Pyongyang’s freezing of its nuclear programs and to accept North Korea’s proposal to discuss “South Korea’s nuclear problem” at the next round of six-party talks--a reference to the production of small amounts of weapons-grade plutonium and highly-enriched uranium (HEU) in what Seoul described as unauthorized experiments by its scientists. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has conducted three on-site inspections in South Korea in connection with this disclosure. None of these conditions the North has set is likely to be met by the Bush administration.

The U.S. will nonetheless continue to work closely with its allies in Seoul and Tokyo in order to coordinate its policy and rely heavily on Beijing and to a lesser extent on Moscow to exert diplomatic pressure on Pyongyang to make a fourth round a reality. All this may begin to happen even before the second Bush term begins.

It is exceedingly unlikely that Washington will modify its goal of CVID--a complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear program. Although the other participants in the six-party talks, including the North, share the goal of denuclearization in the North and on the Korean peninsula as a whole, however, they do not necessarily embrace the CVID mantra wholeheartedly. Seoul and Tokyo are notable exceptions but Beijing and Moscow seem inclined to support Pyongyang’s insistence that the latter has a right, as a sovereign state, to pursue a peaceful, that is, non-military, nuclear program. Nor are the former and current allies of the North likely to accept the kind of intrusive inspection regime the U.S. has in mind. Pyongyang’s reversal of its position on what Washington believes is a program to develop nuclear weapons utilizing HEU is another stumbling block that needs to be overcome in the six-party talks, although it may not necessarily hamper the convening of a fourth round. Although the U.S. claims that the North had acknowledged its existence during a visit by Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly to Pyongyang in October 2002, the North has never publicly endorsed that claim but categorically denies that such a program exists.

Another dimension of continuity in U.S. policy toward the Korean peninsula pertains to the management of the U.S.-ROK alliance. The Kim Dae Jung government’s energetic pursuit of its engagement or “Sunshine” policy vis-à-vis the North had created some strains in Seoul-Washington relations, for the Bush administration did not share its predecessor’s assessment of the utility of negotiating with the North. The situation

worsened with the emergence of the Roh Moo Hyun government, which, while proclaiming adherence to the Kim Dae Jung line, actually has tried to be more conciliatory toward the North. More important, the Roh government has adopted the rhetoric of independence (*chaju*) for its foreign policy, vowing to lessen its reliance on the U.S. even in national defense. Roh's visit to the U.S. and meeting with Bush in the summer of 2003, however, helped to improve the bilateral relations measurably. The Roh government continues to underscore the need for a "horizontal relationship" between Seoul and Washington and for a "cooperative self-reliant national defense." Notwithstanding the frequently heard criticisms and apprehensions, however, U.S.-ROK relations appear to be in reasonably good shape.

The Roh government's actual track record has belied the rhetoric of some of its ardent supporters. Most important, it has dispatched 2,800 troops to Iraq, which makes the South Korean military contingent, consisting mainly of construction and medical personnel but backed by combat troops, the third largest foreign contingent after the U.S. and the United Kingdom.

The Bush administration's plan to redeploy U.S. forces in Korea--relocating them to south of Seoul--and to withdraw about a third of the estimated 38,000 troops had initially created concerns in the Roh government and, especially, among most of the South Korean citizenry. Laborious negotiations, however, have produced mutually satisfactory agreements, notably the extension of the period during which troop withdrawal is to be completed to 2008. Seoul has also accepted the idea that U.S. troops in the South have a broader objective than local defense--that they may be deployed outside of the peninsula should need arise.

Although mutual dependence in trade and economic interactions is asymmetric--with the U.S. being more important to South Korea than vice versa--the two allies count each other as one of the most important economic partners. Such close relationship is bound to create friction occasionally or, even, perennially. The two sides, for example, need to resume negotiations on a mutual investment treaty, which have been suspended due to the screen quota issue. Here it is Seoul that needs to show more flexibility, given its recent successes in film-making, winning international prizes and expanding clientele both at home and abroad. A further liberalization of its agricultural market may also emerge as an issue, if not a source of friction. Seoul, for example, maintains an import quota of 4 percent on rice, which it has recently proposed to raise to 7.5 percent. A total ban on the import of U.S. beef, moreover, has been in effect for nearly a year.

Given the close linkage between U.S.-DPRK relations and inter-Korean relations, Seoul's eagerness to make headway in the latter has the potential to strain its relations with Washington. During Secretary of State Colin Powell's visit to Seoul on the eve of the U.S. presidential election, his ROK counterpart, Ban Ki-moon, is reported to have asked for more flexibility and "creative" approaches from the United States in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue. The Kaesong industrial park project is another potential source of strain in Seoul-Washington relations, for the latter plainly does not share the former's enthusiasm for the project's significance and potential benefits.

Change

Most changes in the second Bush term's policy toward the Korean peninsula will likely be of tactical nature. Given the overriding importance of the North Korean nuclear issue, let us dwell on possible tactical adjustments that Washington may find necessary to make.

As already noted, the United States will continue to uphold its pursuit of CVID at the strategic level. Aware of Pyongyang's abhorrence of the term, which it has called a synonym for a strategy for regime change, the United States may refrain from using the term--at least, in the formal sessions of six-party talks and in informal bilateral contacts with the North on the sidelines of the talks. This reportedly happened during the third round of the talks in June.

The possibility that Washington will join its allies, Seoul and Tokyo, in providing energy and other assistance to Pyongyang, which the latter equates with compensation, however, appears all but non-existent. Beijing already provides not only substantial food and energy aid but also other types of assistance such as a glass factory to the North. Moscow, too, has expressed a willingness to participate in a "compensation" package in connection with six-party talks.

Tactical change in U.S. policy can be envisioned under ominous circumstances. Should the North refuse to return to six-party talks or should it persist in denying the existence of an HEU-based nuclear weapons program, the diplomatic option may well evaporate. This will open the way for the adoption of non-diplomatic, that is, forcible, alternatives. First to be tried will most likely be economic sanctions. Although the United States may attempt to take the issue to the UN Security Council, there is a high probability that China may veto any resolution imposing sanctions on the DPRK, the only country with which it has a military alliance. Should that happen, the United States will have no choice but to impose sanctions outside of the UN framework.

Depending on how the abduction issue evolves--that is to say, should a satisfactory resolution of the issue fail to materialize--Japan may turn out to be the strongest supporter of the United States in this endeavor. The Liberal Democratic Party, the senior partner of Japan's ruling coalition, has already adopted a five-stage plan for imposing sanctions on North Korea. Based on two laws enacted by the Japanese Diet--one allowing Japan unilaterally to ban cash remittances to and trade with North Korea and another enabling the government to ban North Korean ships from entering Japanese ports--, the plan envisages, in the first phase, a freezing or a suspension of humanitarian aid to the North. In the second phase, the monitoring of cash remittances to and business transactions with the North will be tightened up. In the third phase, the government would conditionally prohibit cash remittances and trade. The fourth phase would entail an all-out ban on both. In the final phase, North Korean ships would be prohibited from sailing to Japan. All this is calculated to hurt the North, which counts Japan as its most important trading partner. Cash remittances from Japan (by Korean residents loyal to the North) totaled 2.7 billion yen in fiscal 2003 (April 2003 to March 2004); since this amount is based on what has officially been reported, the actual amount is believed to be much higher.

In conjunction with economic sanctions, interdiction of ships and aircraft to and from North Korea may occur. The proliferation security initiative (PSI) is already in place for such contingency, of which an exercise took place off Tokyo Bay in October. Japan, the United States, France, and Australia took part in it.

Finally, the ultimate option of "surgical" or preemptive strikes against suspected nuclear facilities in the North is theoretically available. Realistically, however, the probability of such option being adopted is exceedingly low. Among many constraints, the following are noteworthy.

First, not only has the North deployed over 10,000 pieces of long-range artillery and over 200 multiple rocket launchers underground just north of the Demilitarized Zone--which are capable of engulfing Seoul and its immediate environs in a "sea of fire" instantaneously--but the North also has a formidable arsenal of short- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles--Scud and *Nodong* missiles--capable of hitting targets as far as the eastern part of Japan, including Tokyo. Additionally, the North may also possess a "nuclear deterrent," as it has repeatedly warned since April 2003. The remark the North Korean press attributes to its supreme leader, Kim Jong Il--to the effect that the "earth without [North] Korea must be shattered to smithereens"--cannot be dismissed as a mere bluster.

Second, stretched to the limit in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States is in no position to open a third front on the Korean peninsula, which air strikes against the North will necessitate. Air strikes, in other words, are all but certain to trigger another Korean War. Finally, there is no guarantee that the use of force can accomplish the goal of eradicating all or even most of the North's nuclear facilities, for the location of its HEU-related facilities remains hidden to aerial and satellite reconnaissance.

Since North Korea has warned more than once that it will regard economic sanctions as a declaration of war, the possibility that Pyongyang will use force first cannot be ruled out. Inasmuch as war, albeit catastrophic to all concerned, is most likely to end in the North's defeat, however, the Kim Jong Il regime can perhaps be counted on not to commit suicide.

What is plain nonetheless is that the fiercely proud DPRK will not surrender easily either at the conference table or on the battlefield. It must be offered either a face-saving way out or a judicious combination of carrots and sticks. Just as China has been most instrumental in getting the six-party process started, so it can and perhaps will play a pivotal role in averting the worst-case scenario. One should recall in this connection that North Korea does have a track record of reversing positions, opting grudgingly for pragmatic compromises. Cases in point are its reversal in 1991 of a long-standing and vociferous opposition to separate membership in the United Nations and its acceptance in 2003 of three-party talks and then six-party talks. In both cases it was China, the North's only military ally and most important source of fuel and food aid, that had provided the necessary impetus to Pyongyang.

In sum, U.S. policy toward the Korean peninsula in a second Bush term will feature both continuity and change, with the former vastly outweighing the latter. The pressing need to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue, however, entails the danger that tactical adjustments Washington may choose to make may prove to be counter-productive. Only multilateral cooperation, encompassing all the participants in six-party talks, can ultimately produce a peaceful solution to the threat of nuclear proliferation on the Korean peninsula, thereby obviating a conflagration of monumental magnitude there and even beyond.