


Policy Forum 04-55A: The Second Bush Administration and the Outlook on Its North Korean Policy: “Odd Man Out?”

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The Second Bush Administration and the Outlook on Its North Korean Policy: "Odd Man Out?"

By David Kang

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I. Introduction

David Kang, Associate Professor of Government at Dartmouth College and co-author of *Nuclear North Korea: A Debate on Engagement Strategies* , writes: "if the current Northeast Asian

countries' policy of economic cooperation and trade were to bear fruit, then it is not inconceivable that the US itself -- not North Korea -- may become the 'odd man out.'"

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II. Report by David Kang

-"The Second Bush Administration and the Outlook on Its North Korean Policy: 'Odd Man Out?'"
by David Kang

Now that Bush is reelected and the new advisers on foreign policy have been installed, what can we expect from them on its approach toward the Korean peninsula in the next 4 years?

It is no exaggeration to state that while there has been no noticeable progress on the North Korean nuclear issue during the first Bush administration, there has continued to be considerable change among the countries in the northeast Asian region on economic and diplomatic fronts.

If this is indeed the case, what are the US options, when the North Korean regime has survived for longer than almost anyone expected, and the probability of its demise seems to be rather low?

One option for the second Bush administration is to take into account the changing Northeast Asian geopolitical situation carefully and develop a flexible, long-term strategy vis a vis North Korea. Another option is to continue its hardline policy.

If the latter path is chosen, little progress is envisioned in solving the nuclear issue, due to the fact that America's attention is almost entirely focused on the Iraq situation at the present time. And even if the US does pay sustained attention to the North Korea issue, their mutual distrust is so deep that the prospect of either side giving an inch is remote at best. In other words, the issue has not got out of the starting gate, and the current stalemate is likely to continue in the future, for two main reasons. First, there is very little room to pressure North Korea. War, and even sanctions, are likely to find little support in the U.S. or the region. Second, North Korea has generally responded to pressure with more pressure. Pressure has not worked in the past, and it appears unlikely to work in the future.

One thing to note is that for three years North Korea has chosen not to cross a "red line," by testing a nuclear weapon or testing an intercontinental ballistic missile. If North Korea continues to restrain itself, then it is likely that other East Asian countries involved in the six-party talks will not support US policies designed to increase pressure on North Korea. The countries in the region are more concerned about North Korean collapse or chaos than they are about an unprovoked North Korean attack.

Moreover, while there is much skepticism about Kim Jongil's intentions, North Korea open-market policy is accelerating, notably it has abandoned its centrally planned economy and allows supply and demand to set prices. The North has also moved forward on the creation of special economic zones.

These changes have greatly affected the citizens of North Korea, and, once unleashed, it will be difficult to return to its previous economic situation.

The Northeast Asian countries welcome such changes in North Korea. South Korea is leading the efforts to pursue the economic integration of North Korea into the region. While the recent Roh-Bush summit meeting in Chile was cordial, in the same week Roh made a series of speeches in which

he strongly advocated economic engagement with the North. While South Korea continues to attempt to find a way to cooperate with the U.S., it is also likely that the next three years will see the South resisting attempts to pressure the North. For example, trade between South and North Korea has become increasingly active in recent years, and in the last month, Seoul announced that it would open an official government liaison office in North Korea, to work with the DPRK on developing the north's abundant mineral deposits.

China as well shows little signs of desiring to pressure the North. While China continues to take the a strong interest in attempting to restart the six-party talks, a number of observers point out that China desires stability in North Korea as much as it desires a solution to the nuclear issue. And without Chinese cooperation, any attempt to isolate the North will be difficult, if not impossible. China also continues to nudge the North toward economic reforms. During the last 4 years, the trade between China and North Korea rapidly increased, along with reports that Kim Jong-il himself has visited Shanghai industrial zones three times in the last 1-1/2 years.

Likewise Japan, although asserting that resolution of the nuclear issue is a priority, Prime Minister Koizumi suggested that normalization of ties with North Korea is a realistic goal. Russia, not to be left behind, is in talks with both North and South Korea about building an oil pipeline into the peninsula.

Under these conditions, and considering the negligible progress on the nuclear issue due to the recalcitrant stances on the parts of both the US and North Korea, the way to break the current deadlock and move toward some sort of resolution in NE Asia is to continue to encourage North Korea's open economic policy and for the Northeast Asian countries to forge a united and coherent strategy.

Stated another way, the new Bush administration must decide whether to participate with Northeast Asian countries in the continuing regional economic integration, or to ignore the economic situation and unilaterally concentrate only on the nuclear issue.

The Bush administration must also ask whether the economic reform in North Korea will ultimately accelerate political change, or whether to attempt to isolate the North, and which strategy is more effective in result in bringing benefit to the US.

If the current Northeast Asian countries' policy of economic cooperation and trade were to bear fruit, then it is not inconceivable that the US itself -- not North Korea -- may become the "odd man out."

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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