


Policy Forum 08-091: Bush=Obama=Lee Myungbak? Eccentric Syllogism!

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Bush=Obama=Lee Myungbak? Eccentric Syllogism!

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By Wooksik Cheong

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I. Introduction

Wooksik Cheong, representative of Peace Network (www.peacekorea.org), writes, "Obama's and Bush's North Korean policies are very similar but have important differences. Lee's and Bush's North Korean policies differed greatly and did not go well together. Then, there should be much greater difference in Obama's and Lee's North Korea policies. Then what should be the future of the ROK-US alliance and cooperation on dealing with North Korean nuclear issues?"

Youngjae Hur and Ida Grandas, interns of Peace Network, contributed to the translation of this article.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Article by Wooksik Cheong

- "Bush=Obama=Lee Myungbak? Eccentric Syllogism!"

By Wooksik Cheong

President Lee should also open his left ear

"Obama's idea doesn't differ from the second Bush administration's North Korea policy. Both are aiming at settling the North Korea nuclear problem through direct dialogue and Six Party Talks."

This comment by a high official at the Blue House has been figuring in media for the last two days. The official further stated that the cooperation between South Korea and the United States still is crucial, and that there will be no changes of the North Korea policy because there is no difference between South Korea's policy and Mr. Obama's.

After talk over phone with the President-elect Barack Obama on Nov. 7, President Lee Myung-bak announced strengthened alliance between the two countries and sustained cooperation on the North Korea nuclear issue. To me, it seems like the government is feeling relieved, believing that they have solved the potential turbulence over the alliance and the disharmony of the North Korean policies.

But did the Lee government really solve these issues? To figure that out, we need to look at two things. Firstly, are the North Korea policies of the second Bush administration and Obama really the same? And secondly, have the Bush and the Lee administration cooperated well on dealing with North Korea policies?

Obama's North Korea policy seems to be so similar to the Bush administration's that some people even have said that Obama, rather than McCain, is the successor of Bush's policy that has been adopted since 2007. After six years wasting time, the Bush administration's North Korea policy finally restrained the condemnation of North Korea, promoted both the Six Party Talks and bilateral dialogues with the North, negotiation on the give-and-take principle, and combining the North's nuclear abandonment with the normalization of the U.S.-North Korea relations. Obama promotes the same type of approach. Therefore, the South Korean government's understanding of that the North Korea policies of the Bush administration and Obama are surprisingly similar, make sense.

But the government fails to notice two important differences. Firstly, Bush was pushed to change, while Obama got a different start. Bush had to change the North Korea policy due to the circumstances while Obama's idea originated from his international pragmatism. Obama made unconditioned dialogue with leaders of hostile countries to the core of his election pledges for diplomatic policies despite strong critic not only from the Republicans but also from the then competitor Hillary Clinton. His strong stance could have affected him negatively, but did not, thanks to his firm position on that rejecting dialogue with enemies does not realize the U.S.'s interests.

The second difference is the summit with Kim Jong-il. President Bush repeatedly emphasized that he did not have intention to meet Kim Jong-il during his Presidential tenure, even if his policy had changed. Obama, in his turn, is going to meet Kim Jong-il. In my view, there is no need to dwell upon the fact that the U.S.-North Korea summit is an essential gateway to denuclearization and peace on

the Korean Peninsula.

This difference is important since North Korea will behave differently to Obama than to Bush. North Korea could not help doubting the Bush administration when they were defined as "Axis of evil" and "The Outpost of Tyranny." Obama, on the other hand, has not made any moral or ideological condemnation of North Korea or Kim Jong-il during his campaign. This will make North Korea to have more trust in the new administration.

What North Korea's future policy towards the U.S. is going to look like is already being revealed in their behavior. One example is the dispatch of Ri Gun, director of North American Affairs at the DPRK Foreign Ministry, to the U.S. for keeping a track of the presidential elections. Ri firmly expressed that the DPRK is willing to accelerate the normalization of the U.S.-North Korea relations by saying, "No matter which administration be will be established, we are ready to deal with the administration's policy toward the DPRK."

Another example is Kim Jong-il's photos politics. North Korean media is repeatedly releasing photos of Kim Jong-il watching a soccer game or inspecting military units. That sends a message to Obama that Kim Jong-il has no problem in ruling the nation, and is ready for doing business, whipping off the rumors of his health problem.

Another important thing is that the considerable differences between the Bush and the Lee administrations' North Korea policies lead to a severe disharmony. During warnings on a North Korean food shortage, the Lee administration was making excuses such as "the current situation of North Korea is not that severe," "national consensus is needed," or "should be considered only when the North asks for it." Meanwhile, the Bush administration decided to give 500,000 tons of food aid and started humanitarian assistance in June.

On June 26, North Korea turned over its nuclear list after half a year of controversies and struggles. The Bush administration perceived it as a big progress, but the neo-conservatives harshly criticized the administration saying, "nuclear weapons are not on the list." Moreover, Yoo Myung-hwan, Korea's minister of foreign affairs and trade, made a comment saying that the omission of the weapons is "regretful," a comment standing on the same side as the neo-conservatives, even though Korea should be a partner and strategic ally.

The subject of the declaration that is stated in the agreement of Oct. 3, 2007, is "all its nuclear programs." Nuclear weapons were not in the list from the outset. It is doubtful whether the most responsible person for South Korean foreign affairs has ever read the agreement properly.

When North Korea was removed from the U.S. list of sponsors of terrorism, the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade announced that it welcomed the U.S. decision. But some lawmakers of the ruling party criticized the decision, saying that "the U.S. yielded under the North Korean threat." Even President Lee Myung-bak said that the decision was made under North Korean threat, and thus wrong.

If this did not happen in the lame duck period of the President Bush, there could have been a serious diplomatic confusion between the two governments. This is also the reason for those self-scornful jokes saying, "the neo-cons that were kicked out of the Bush administration moved to the Lee administration."

Let me conclude by a syllogism. Obama's and Bush's North Korean policies are very similar but have important differences. Lee's and Bush's North Korean polices differed greatly and did not go well together. Then, there should be much greater difference in Obama's and Lee's North Korea policies.

Then what should be the future of the ROK-US alliance and cooperation on dealing with North Korean nuclear issues?

I would like to give a few words to the President Lee.

"Please listen not only to the high officials, busy maintaining their survival, conservative pastors and experts, but also to various opinions from progressive experts and former officials of the "lost decade." Listen not only with your right ear but also left ear. By doing so, you will be able to make the first step to become a historic leader."

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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