

Policy Forum 06-101: The Democratic Party's Victory in the U.S. Midterm Elections and the North Korean Nuclear Issue

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Article by Moo-jin Yang

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I. Introduction

Moo-jin Yang, Director for External Affairs at the Institute for Far Eastern Studies at Kyungnam University, writes, "With the reopening of the Six-Party Talks at hand and the Democratic victory in the U.S. midterm elections, it is highly possible that the means of resolving the North Korean nuclear issue will switch from the single track of sanctions to a two-track diplomacy of pressure and negotiations. South Korea must strengthen its role as an active mediator in the process of negotiations and utilize the opportunity presented by the restoration of inter-Korean relations."

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II. Article by Moo-jin Yang

- The Democratic Party's Victory in the U.S. Midterm Elections and the North Korean Nuclear Issue by Moo-jin Yang

The U.S. midterm elections were held on November 7, 2006 amid worldwide attention. The elections resulted in a major victory for the Democratic Party, which gained the majority in both the houses of Congress. It appears that this will stem the unilateralism that has characterized the Bush administration and the Republican-controlled Congress for the last six years.

The North Korean nuclear issue is the most serious issue currently confronting the Korean peninsula. The Democratic Party has called for bilateral talks between the U.S. and North Korea in order to find a solution to the nuclear issue, as well as a more comprehensive approach that uses both carrots and sticks as part of negotiations. In contrast, the Bush administration has emphasized multilateral talks and adopted a unilateral approach of sanctions and pressure. The views of the Bush administration and Democratic Party conflict in terms of what form the talks should take and how to resolve the issue.

In September, Congress passed the National Defense Authorization Act, which was originally proposed by the then minority Democratic Party. However, the bill was passed because it enjoyed the support of prominent Republicans such as Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations; John Warner, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee; and Jim Leach, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific. The bill calls for the appointment by mid-December of a senior presidential envoy to act as North Korean Policy Coordinator, who would be responsible for conducting a complete review of North Korean policy, including that on the nuclear issue. The North Korean Policy Coordinator must submit to Congress a general report on North Korean policy within six months of his or her appointment. The course of North Korean policy will diverge according to whom the president appoints and how he receives the general report submitted by the coordinator.

Under a Republican administration and Democratic Congress, the outlook for American policy on North Korea and the nuclear issue can be roughly divided into three possibilities: change, no change, and stalemate. The first outlook is for change: In light of worsening public opinion, specifically that regarding the war in Iraq, the Bush administration and the defeated Republican Party have no choice but to adjust their foreign policy. The Bush administration's lack of dialogue with North Korea contributed in part to the Democratic Party's victory. It is also inevitable that there will be changes in the foreign policy and security staff of both the White House and Congress. Donald Rumsfeld, one of the administration's hardliners on North Korea, has already resigned from his post as Secretary of Defense. The prospects for Senate confirmation of John Bolton, another

hardliner on North Korea, as ambassador to the United Nations are also dim. Furthermore, the current chairmen of the House and Senate Foreign Relations Committees, which handle North Korean issues, will undoubtedly be replaced by Democrats. The leading candidate for the position of chairman of the House Foreign Relations Committee is Democrat Tom Lantos, an advocate of bilateral talks between North Korea and the United States. America's approach to North Korea will certainly soften as part of the process of adjusting its foreign relations as a whole. The atmosphere is one in which the voice of hardliners on North Korea will give way to advocates of dialogue. The Democratic Party will hold hearings and seek to increase public perception of the Bush administration and Republican Party's North Korean policy as a failure. Indeed, the Bush administration's policy failure will likely become a point of contention in the 2008 presidential elections. The Democratic Party's call for the appointment of a North Korean Policy Coordinator is part of its plans to highlight the successes of the Clinton administration's North Korean policy, namely the freezing of its nuclear program and prevention of its development of nuclear weapons, in contrast to the Republican Party's record. The Democrats are likely to increase their pressure on Republicans by criticizing the Bush administration's hard-line policy and insisting on bilateral talks. In short, the Bush administration and Republican Party have no choice but to change their North Korean policy.

The second outlook is for no change. Congress has limited influence on American foreign policy, over which the executive branch has ultimate authority. The midterm elections represented a verdict on the Iraq war and antiterrorism policy, not a verdict on nonproliferation policy with respect to North Korea or Iran. The Democratic Party, keeping in mind the next presidential election, will focus its efforts on the Iraq war, a more important issue to the American electorate than North Korea. In addition, the position of hardliners such as Vice President Dick Cheney and Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security Robert Joseph remains strong. It is highly unlikely that President Bush's views of North Korea, which are based on his religious beliefs and ideology, will change. Furthermore, Democrats have adopted a tough position on human rights, one part of the larger North Korean issue, and are not seeking to eliminate the Six-Party Talks themselves. Like the Republicans, they do not recognize North Korea as a nuclear state. The Democratic Party's criticism of North Korean policy is most likely to serve as election fodder. If the Democrats lead a new policy initiative on North Korea, they may have to shoulder the responsibility for producing results. It appears that the underlying basis of North Korean policy will remain unchanged, even if there may be some softening for strategic reasons. The limitations on change in North Korean policy are supported by the lack of change in the Bush administration's hard-line approach.

The third scenario is stalemate. The Democratic Party will pressure the Bush administration through hearings and investigations of the Iraq war and foreign policy overall. The Bush administration's hold on state affairs will loosen as it enters a lame-duck period and its support declines. Issues related to the Korean peninsula will naturally take a back seat to more pressing matters. Under this scenario, it is highly possible that the North Korean nuclear issue will fall into a stalemate with no progress.

Looking at these three possible outcomes, it is unlikely that the results of the midterm elections will bring about any immediate change in America's North Korean policy. Rather, there may be some partial changes, such as bilateral talks within the framework of the Six-Party Talks, increased but informal U.S.-DPRK contacts in Beijing or New York, and bilateral talks mediated by China or South Korea.

American politics is led by public opinion, which is funneled through elections. Public opinion and elections are the absolutes in American politics. Congressmen and political leaders pay attention to public opinion and accept election results. Public opinion is the will of the people, and elections are

the system for this will. If political leaders did not defer to public opinion and the electoral system, then they would be vilified as enemies of democracy by press and citizenry alike. This suggests that the Bush administration, routed in the election, must change its unilateral approach. It is hoped that the administration, which must consider Congress' decisions, will show an affirmative change in its North Korean policy.

In the wake of the North Korean nuclear test on October 9, there are two currents of opinion flowing in South Korea. One supports sanctions against the North sponsored by the United Nations, while the other supports dialogue and negotiations through the soon to be reopened Six-Party Talks. The former supports the prolongation of a policy of pressure, while the latter favors the continuation of a policy of engagement. It is difficult for pressure and engagement to coexist. Sanctions will have practical results only if an anti-Kim Jong Il group exists in North Korea and will benefit from stricter sanctions. However, there is no anti-Kim Jong Il group that is capable of mounting any opposition. As such, sanctions will only serve to unify Kim Jong Il's internal support. On the other hand, engagement can only be seriously pursued if it enjoys both international and domestic backing. Engagement requires perseverance and is much more than just words; it is a political action for the sake of integration. American and South Korean leaders have had much to say about engaging the North, and citizens of both countries have lacked patience. The outcome of the midterm elections in part has demonstrated Americans' view that Bush's hard-line policy on North Korea has failed. South Korea has continued to pursue a policy of engagement, including through the current administration, but recently this policy has come under attack. This may be due to "engagement fatigue," a lack of patience, or ironically enough, a revival of cold war attitudes.

On October 31, North Korea and the United States held a bilateral meeting in Beijing, which was facilitated by China, and agreed to reopen the Six-Party Talks. Over four weeks have passed by, but a date for the talks has yet to be fixed. This in and of itself shows that the talks will be far from smooth, even if they are restarted. However, it is still too early to lose hope. The participant countries must endeavor to reopen dialogue in the near future. If the agreement to restart the talks was not merely an election maneuver on America's part and a move to buy time and avoid UN sanctions on North Korea's part, then both countries must make known the date they would prefer. The speedy reconvening of the talks is important, but so are the fruits to be gained from such talks. If North Korea returns to the talks in good faith, the Bush administration may be willing to provide some compensation early on in order to bring about a positive outcome. However, if North Korea perceived the midterm elections as simply an opportunity to pressure the Bush administration and return to the Six-Party Talks in form only to press for bilateral negotiations, then the United States may actually take a tougher stance toward North Korea. North Korea must restrain itself from goading the Republican and Democratic Parties and thereby deepening their mistrust.

With the reopening of the Six-Party Talks at hand and the Democratic victory in the U.S. midterm elections, it is highly possible that the means of resolving the North Korean nuclear issue will switch from the single track of sanctions to a two-track diplomacy of pressure and negotiations. South Korea must strengthen its role as an active mediator in the process of negotiations and utilize the opportunity presented by the restoration of inter-Korean relations. South Korea has played its own role in the North Korean nuclear issue, in spite of its limited position. For example, it developed the idea of a so-called "creative ambiguity" and several agendas that served to persuade both North Korea and the United States, leading to the issuance of the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement. In addition, it was South Korea that proposed the "joint comprehensive approach" adopted as the basic framework for the reopening of the Six-Party Talks. With thorough preparation and wisdom, South Korea will be able to overcome the limitations of its position.

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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