



Nov. 28, 2012 | NO. 35

ISSUE BRIEF
THE ASAN INSTITUTE for POLICY STUDIES

Impact of Presidential Elections on North Korea Policy¹

Bruce Klingner
The Heritage Foundation

The presidential elections of South Korea and the United States (U.S.) have focused primarily on economic issues and only tangentially on foreign policy. However, the election outcomes will have an impact on both countries' policies toward North Korea, though far more significantly in South Korea.

South Korean presidential candidates have vowed to change Lee Myung-bak's current strategy, accepting to differing degrees the flawed premise that *Seoul* bears responsibility for Pyongyang's decades long refusal to abandon its nuclear arsenal and its repeated acts of terrorism and war.

As such, the selection of the next Korean president will figure prominently in Seoul's future course toward North Korea. With the withdrawal of Ahn Cheol-soo from the race, South Korean voters have a stark choice between two significantly different approaches to Pyongyang.

The U.S. presidential campaign had surprisingly little debate or even content on Asian issues, other than China as a foreign economic competitor. North Korea was absent from campaign discussions, perhaps because Pyongyang has been uncharacteristically quiescent. Since President Barack Obama already made a dramatic shift in North Korea policy in 2009, adopting a much firmer, hardline policy than originally planned, there would have been relatively little difference between Obama and challenger Mitt Romney's North Korea policies.

Therefore, U.S. policy toward the Korean Peninsula will be largely a continuation of the first Obama term. However, the expected replacement of several senior policymakers could have an impact on the manner of implementation, though not on the general direction of policy toward Pyongyang. The expected departure of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the backbone of Obama's foreign policy, opens the door for candidates likely to be far more willing to engage North Korea, despite the failure of previous attempts.

¹ Note: This article was written after the U.S. presidential election and prior to the result of the Korean presidential election.

Assessing Previous South Korean Policies

The current perception that Seoul must adjust its policy toward Pyongyang is driven largely by the lack of progress in inter-Korean relations and heightened tension from North Korean threats.

Progressive candidates Moon Jae-in advocates a return to South Korea's sunshine policy while conservative candidate Park Geun-hye recommends a variation on Lee Myung-bak's conditional approach. It is therefore useful to review these earlier policies as a means to plot the likely course of the next president's approach.

Kim Dae-jung – seeking change through sunshine

Kim defined inducing economic and political change in North Korea and moderating regime behavior as principal tenets of his sunshine policy of engagement. He believed that providing massive, unconditional economic benefits and acting non-confrontationally would induce North Korea to feel less threatened and eventually the regime would reciprocate.

But by the end of his term, Kim Dae-jung faced strong domestic criticism over his one-sided engagement policy, particularly after his reputation was tarnished by the disclosure of the \$500 million bribe to attain the inter-Korean summit. Yet Kim continued to believe in the efficacy of his sunshine policy even after he left office.

In a 2007 speech in Washington DC, Kim asserted his policy had brought the U.S. and North Korea to “the verge of an agreement regarding North Korea's missile and nuclear issue, as well as normalization of relations.”² As an attendee at White House meetings on North Korea during the Clinton administration, I can attest that this was not the case.

Kim Dae-jung believed that Pyongyang's sole rationale for nuclear weapons was because the regime wanted “direct dialogue with the U.S.” and North Korea would give up its nuclear weapons once it received a security assurance from the U.S. Both the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations provided several such assurances, but Pyongyang did not abandon its nuclear weapons.

Roh Moo-hyun – pursuing an extortion-based foreign policy

President Roh abandoned any pretense of reform and instead pursued an unconditional outreach to Pyongyang that ran counter to the Six Party Talks precepts of multilateralism, conditionality, and inducing change in North Korea.

During a May 2006 trip to Mongolia, Roh declared that he was willing to make “many concessions,” including providing unconditional aid, in return for an inter-Korean summit. These comments were an abandonment of his previous vows to condition a summit on North Korean return to and progress in the Six Party Talks.

Roh returned from the 2007 inter-Korean summit stating, “We very naively thought reforms were a good thing, and that we could reform the North with Kaesong. We were wrong.... We

² Kim Dae-jung speech at the National Press Club, September 2007.

should try to avoid making such misunderstanding by not going on and on with ‘reform’ and ‘opening up’ to North Koreans.”³ He even directed that the Ministry of Unification remove the word “reform” from its website or any reference to it in any South Korean policy statements.

During a 2008 interview, Roh underscored the one-sided nature of his engagement policy, stating:

At the Six-Party Talks we supported the North Korean position as much as we could. At international conferences, when remarks critical of North Korea arose, we argued for North Korea with as much logic as we could....We avoided as much as we could statements provoking North Korea. Sometimes, we had to endure even if our pride was hurt. We did this all to secure trust [with North Korea]. Of course, North Korea did not pay us back quickly. But by doing so, North-South relations expanded greatly.⁴

President Roh’s determination to engage Pyongyang was impervious to North Korean actions. After North Korea’s October 2006 nuclear test, while other nations were seeking to sanction North Korea, the Roh administration *bragged* that inter-Korean economic activity had *increased* in the fourth quarter of 2006 *despite* the nuclear test.

A Korean proverb states that “pouring water into a cracked pot is worthless.” The same is true of pouring money into North Korea without any requirement or hope of achieving reform. Despite hundreds of inter-Korean meetings and \$7 billion in cash, aid, and developmental assistance during 10 years of engagement,⁵ Pyongyang did not reform its economy, alter its political system, nor abandon its nuclear weapons programs. Engagement without reciprocity may have reduced inter-Korean tensions, but it did not further South Korean policy objectives.

Lee Myung-bak - implementing a principled engagement policy

Another Korean proverb states that “a good medicine is bitter to the mouth.” Such was the case with Lee Myung-bak’s strategy toward the North. Lee vowed to maintain South Korea’s engagement policy but condition economic, humanitarian, and political benefits with tangible North Korean progress toward denuclearization and reforms.⁶

President Lee offered to:

- boost North Korean per capita income to \$3,000 in 10 years
- establish five free trade areas
- educate and train 300,000 North Korean workers
- create a \$40 billion international fund to develop the North Korean economy.

³ Lee Gwang-gil, “Kaesong Industrial Complex Will Succeed” Tongil News, October 4, 2007,

<http://www.tongilnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=74809>

⁴ Free Zone News, <http://www.freezonenews.com/news/article.html?no=29424> and Robert Koehler, The Marmot’s Hole, October 2, 2008, <http://www.rjkoehler.com/2008/10/02/shut-the-hell-up/>.

⁵ Bae Jung-ho, “Lee Myung-bak Administration’s North Korea Policy and Inter-Korean Relations,” in *The U.S.-ROK Alliance in the 21st Century*, edited by Bae Jung-ho and Abraham Denmark, The Korea Institute for National Unification, 2009, p. 48.

⁶ Kim Jun Yop, “Lee’s Policy Towards North Korea Will Succeed If Carried Out As Planned,” *The Daily NK*, February 5, 2008, at www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk01100&num=3221

By combining both progressive (promise of massive benefits) and conservative (conditionality) elements, his policy was a more pragmatic, less ideological approach than either of his two predecessors. It was also more consistent with the Six-Party Talks goal of using coordinated multilateral diplomatic efforts to leverage Pyongyang to implement its nuclear commitments.

South Korean progressives, however, criticized Lee's policy and blamed any subsequent North Korean provocation, including the deadly attacks on the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong-do, on what they characterized as a "hardline" policy. Yet, in return for promising massive South Korean benefits, what was Lee's hardline, unreasonable demand? Simply for North Korea to abide by the many agreements it had already signed.

Looking to the Past for a Future Policy

Park Geun-hye

The ruling Saenuri Party and Park Geun-hye have distanced themselves from Lee Myung-bak's North Korean policy due to the president's declining popularity. The clearest delineation of Park's policy was her "Building Trust Between Seoul and Pyongyang" article in *Foreign Affairs*. She criticized previous administrations for having chosen either an over-reliance on benefits or pressure.

Park explained that emphasizing "accommodation and inter-Korean solidarity have placed inordinate hope in the idea that if the South provided sustained assistance to the North, the North would abandon its bellicose strategy toward the South. But after years of such attempts, no fundamental change has come." Similarly, she argued that those that sought to pressure Pyongyang "have not been able to influence its behavior in a meaningful way, either."⁷

She proposed a new policy – called *trustpolitik* – that incorporated elements for both "assuming a tough line against North Korea sometimes and a flexible policy open to negotiations other times." She advocates a strong response to any future North Korean military strike but also positive responses to North Korean steps toward reconciliation.

However, there seems to be little difference between her policy and that of Lee Myung-bak. Like the current policy, Park vows that "South Korea must first demonstrate, through a robust and credible deterrent posture, that it will no longer tolerate North Korea's increasingly violent provocations [and] the North will pay a heavy price for its military and nuclear threats....It must be enforced more vigorously than in the past."⁸

Moon Jae-in

Democratic United Party candidate Moon vows to return to the unconditional engagement policy of President Roh and to have an inter-Korean summit within four months of his being elected as president.

⁷ Park Geun-hye (2011) "A New Kind of Korea: Building Trust Between Seoul and Pyongyang," *Foreign Affairs*, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68136/park-geun-hye/a-new-kind-of-korea?page=show>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Moon proposed a comprehensive economic cooperation pact and an economic union with North Korea that would lead to unification of the two economies. He claimed his plan would “allow the economies of the two Korea to reach levels only reached by the United States, Germany and Japan.”⁹

Moon blamed Lee Myung-bak for North Korea’s provocations and the deaths of 50 South Korean citizens. He proclaimed that “after Lee Myung-bak took over the office, precious lives of young people were sacrificed through the *Cheonan* warship sinking and Yeonpyeong Island shelling. The Lee administration completely failed South-North relations, not to mention bringing the situation to only a step away from becoming a war.”¹⁰

To prevent another deadly clash along the Northern Limit Line, Moon would return to Roh’s proposal to turn the West Sea into a peace zone and joint economic development zone, thus abandoning South Korea claims of sovereignty which it has maintained since the end of the Korean War.

U.S. Policy Toward North Korea

Little was said about the Koreas either during the U.S. presidential campaign or on the Obama and Romney campaign websites. Although we have had four years of a track record for President Obama, questions remain whether he would change his policies during a second term.

Yet, Seoul can take comfort from the stability of long-standing U.S. policy to strongly support and respect South Korea, regardless of political party. There are no differences between the Republican and Democratic parties over the importance of the strong military alliance between Washington and Seoul and the necessity of defending South Korea against intimidation or attack.

Republicans, however, disagree with President Obama’s drastic cuts to the defense budget which will lead to a smaller U.S. military. Despite Obama’s claims of an “Asia Pivot,” there are no new U.S. military forces going to the Pacific. The few forces that have been identified, Marines to Australia and littoral combat ships to Singapore, are only rotational rather than permanent deployments. It is a case of strong rhetoric but no new resources.

Under the second Obama administration, there will be cuts to military ship and plane construction, reducing the size of the U.S. force which could support a Korean crisis. The Romney campaign had vowed to prevent the planned \$500 billion in further cuts to the defense budget required under sequestration and instead vowed to increase military forces and spending. Republicans will continue to press for protecting the military from cuts, but will not have the same traction as had Romney won the election.

With regards to North Korea policy, there has been a significant difference between the two political parties in the past. When Barack Obama entered office, he criticized George Bush’s

⁹ “Opposition presidential hopeful proposes economic union with N. Korea,” Yonhap, August 17, 2012, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2012/08/17/5/030100000AEN20120817008500315F.HTML>.

¹⁰ Evan Ramstead, “Moon: Let the Sun Shine In,” Wall Street Journal, August 17, 2012, <http://blogs.wsj.com/korearealtime/2012/08/17/moon-let-the-sun-shine-in/>.

sanctions against North Korea and instead vowed to reach out to Pyongyang, even offering an unconditional summit with Kim Jong-il.

But North Korea quickly showed the regime wouldn't act any differently toward Obama than it had toward Bush. After a series of provocations and threats in early 2009, the Obama administration reacted angrily and abandoned its initial engagement policy. Obama became even tougher toward Pyongyang than Bush was and now his administration brags that it has the strongest U.S. sanctions ever against North Korea – a tacit admission of failure of his initial approach.

Because Obama already changed his policy so drastically in 2009, there would not have been as big a change in U.S. policy toward North Korea had Romney won. Both candidates would have maintained the U.S. prioritization on denuclearization in policy toward North Korea.

Because Obama's initial outreach, as well as this year's Leap Day Agreement with Pyongyang failed, there will be little expectation by the Obama Administration that engaging North Korea will be successful. As such, there will be little inclination for energetic engagement other than hopes that doing so could avert another provocation.

That said, a change in senior policymakers could bring a change in the implementation of Obama's policy. Senator John Kerry, eager to become Secretary of State but seen as a long-shot to get the position, would be most eager to resume dialogue with North Korea. As chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he's offered to travel to Pyongyang, but reportedly been turned down by the White House. Other rumored replacements U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice and National Security Advisor Tom Donilon would make fewer changes.

Potential for U.S.-South Korea Policy Friction

Because both South Korean candidates vow a greater degree of flexibility toward North Korea, while President Obama appears unlikely to do so, there is the potential for strains in the bilateral relationship. The degree to which there is deterioration in the relationship is dependent primarily on the manner and speed with which the next South Korean president approaches Pyongyang and how the new policy is presented to the U.S.

A greater degree of unconditionality in Seoul's provision of assistance to North Korea or if the new Korean president depicted the U.S. as the primary obstacle to improving inter-Korean relations would not be well-received in Washington. The greatest potential for a deterioration in relations would occur if Moon Jae-in were to become president since he advocates a return to Roh's energetic, if naive, approach. Moon's policies would be most at odds with those of the U.S.

Park Geun-hye has demonstrated a strong appreciation for the U.S. alliance as well as a pragmatic approach to the North. Bilateral relations would be smoothest under her stewardship, though she would likely need to appear more independent of Washington than Lee Myung-bak was perceived to be.

The U.S. president would be faced with a dilemma, whether to advocate upholding the Six Party Talks principals of conditionality and reciprocity and risk straining the bond with a trusted and critical ally. Or, to maintain the strength of the alliance to address regional security threats even if it means a return to the failed policies of the past.

Alliance managers from the U.S. and South Korea have worked tirelessly to achieve a bilateral military, political, and economic relationship characterized as the best in its history. It is important that policymakers from both countries strive to maintain that link, lest it begin to unravel.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views
of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.



Bruce Klingner is the Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia at The Heritage Foundation's Asian Studies Center. Klingner joined Heritage in 2007 after 20 years in the intelligence community working at the CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency. In 1993, he was selected as Chief of CIA's Korea Branch which provided analytic reports on military developments during the nuclear crisis with North Korea. From 1996-2001, Klingner was the Deputy Chief for Korea in the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence where he was responsible for analyzing Korean political, military, economic and leadership issues for the president and other senior policymakers.

Klingner is a distinguished graduate of the National War College where he earned a master's degree in national security strategy in 2002. He also earned a master's in strategic intelligence from the Defense Intelligence College and has a bachelor's degree in political science from Middlebury College in Vermont. He is active in Korean martial arts and has attained third degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do and first degree black belt in Hapkido and Teuk Kong Moo Sool.