

U.S. Policy toward the Two Koreas after The U.S. and ROK Elections in 2012

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Abstract

This year's presidential elections in both the U.S. and the Republic of Korea could have a significant impact on Washington's policy toward both Koreas. Reelection of Barack Obama likely would yield continuity, with a commitment to a stronger alliance with the ROK and negotiations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. However, the administration's relationship with South Korea could be affected if the government in Seoul shifts to the left. Expectations for reaching agreement with the DPRK would remain modest, especially after the quick collapse of the aid/nuclear deal reached in early 2012.

President Obama's replacement by Mitt Romney, the Republican Party nominee, likely would tilt U.S. policy toward confrontation with the North, though the differences might prove more rhetorical than substantive. Romney's professed policy prescriptions are consistent with the Obama administration's approach, and he has demonstrated more than a little flexibility in his positions over time. He might follow the example of President George W. Bush, who eventually moved toward engagement with Pyongyang. However, a party and ideological shift in Seoul as a result of the ROK election could generate tension with a Romney administration similar to what occurred between the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments and Bush administration.

Keywords: North Korea, South Korea, Barack Obama, Mitt Romney, George W. Bush, Hillary Clinton, Leon Panetta, Colin Powell, Kim Jong-il, U.S. Foreign Policy, Nuclear Negotiations, Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye, Agreed Framework, Sunshine Policy, Six-Party Talks, Strategic Patience, Asia, People's Republic of China

Introduction

Both South Korea and the United States will hold presidential elections in 2012, which could transform their relations with each other and their policies toward North Korea. In the U.S., incumbent President Barack Obama is running for reelection. His party also is attempting to retain control of the Senate and regain control of the House of Representatives. In the ROK the ruling Saenuri Party is hoping to build on its surprising victory in the National Assembly election earlier this year to retain the presidency.

Four months is a long time in American politics, but the consensus is that the Republican Party is likely to retain control of the House and has a good chance to regain control of the Senate—though almost certainly without the 60 vote majority necessary to break a filibuster, by which the minority can talk legislation to death. Americans tend to vote on economic issues and are disposed to replace President Obama, whose poll ratings remain low. However, though former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney has gained enough delegates to assure his selection as the Republican Party presidential nominee, he still generates little enthusiasm even in his own party. Indeed, during the primary contest voters gave a higher rating to a generic “Republic opponent” than to him or any of the other Republican candidates.¹ Polls currently show President Obama and Mr. Romney to be virtually tied.² Although most political professionals give the former the edge, the election is expected to be close.

So far foreign policy has played only a small role in the election campaign. Romney sounded like most of the other Republican contenders other than Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas), denouncing President Obama for alleged “weakness.”³ Yet the American public perceives the president as being generally successful internationally, highlighted by the killing of Osama bin Laden and ouster of Libyan dictator Moammar Qaddafi last year. In fact, in this area—in contrast to economic policy—voters rate the president favorably, giving him a double digit lead over Romney.⁴ Still, since Americans care little about foreign policy, this issue is not likely to decide the election.

Very little has been said of Korea in the race so far. That is unlikely to change, at least as long as no crisis erupts before November.

If the president is reelected, his administration is likely to continue present policies. There almost certainly will be new personnel: most important, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is expected to step down in

a second Obama term. However, unless her replacement is an Asia specialist, President Obama seems unlikely to lead with a new North Korean initiative.

After taking office, he only reluctantly addressed Pyongyang, preferring a policy of “strategic patience” until forced to react by multiple North Korean provocations.⁵ Moreover, the agreement negotiated by the administration earlier this year was almost immediately violated by the North (which was suspected of conducting a missile launch in the guise of launching a satellite).⁶ That experience likely will reduce what little enthusiasm the administration might otherwise have had for any new approach to Pyongyang. Thus, there is no reason to expect much change in approach irrespective of who ends up in control of Korea policy in a second Obama administration.

Policy toward the DPRK played virtually no role in the seemingly interminable Republican presidential contest. None of the candidates, including Romney, offered specifics about approaching the North. For most of them North Korea was merely a convenient hate object to use when accusing Democrats of “appeasement.”⁷ Romney has insisted that he would be firm toward America’s adversaries, which includes the DPRK, but his career is noteworthy for his willingness to abandon previous positions. Moreover, President George W. Bush, with a reputation for ideological extremism and constancy, dramatically moderated his approach to North Korea in his second term. A similar change is possible if another hawkish Republican is elected president.

History of U.S. Policy toward North Korea

Washington had no relationship with North Korea throughout the Cold War. The two Koreas and their major power allies—the U.S. on one side, China and U.S.S.R. on the other—were separated, with little contact across the Demilitarized Zone. The distance between America and the DPRK persisted along with the Korean peninsula’s unique cold war after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The North’s nuclear activities were exposed in 1990, followed by Pyongyang’s signing of a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency.⁸ After the DPRK banned IAEA inspections, President Bill Clinton considered options ranging from military action, ultimately rejected by the administration, to diplomacy, which resulted in the 1994 Agreed Framework. Disagreements were sharp, but ultimately—and after a dramatic visit by former president Jimmy Carter

to Pyongyang—the U.S. and several other nations, including the ROK and Japan, offered energy and economic inducements in return for Pyongyang’s commitment to dismantle its nuclear program.⁹

The policy was widely reviled by leading Republicans, who nevertheless offered few policy alternatives. Near the end of the Clinton administration Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Pyongyang and the administration entertained the idea of a presidential visit if agreement was reached to limit North Korean ballistic missiles. However, time was too short and these hopes went unrealized.¹⁰

Newly inaugurated President George W. Bush took a very different course. His administration was widely expected to restart the negotiations begun by the Clinton administration. Indeed, Secretary of State Colin Powell explained his intention “to engage with North Korea [and] pick up where President Clinton left off.”¹¹ However, President Bush rejected that course, publicly embarrassing Secretary Powell. (Also losing face was visiting South Korean President Kim Dae-jung.) President Bush spoke of “loathing” Kim Jong-il and later tagged the DPRK as a member of the “axis of evil,” along with Iraq and Iran.¹²

Nevertheless, the administration decided to pursue engagement while broadening the diplomatic agenda from nuclear weapons to include conventional arms control and human rights. However, the revelation of Pyongyang’s uranium enrichment program—an effort originally denied but later admitted by the North—effectively terminated the administration’s diplomatic approach. Both sides unceremoniously buried the Agreed Framework.¹³

Within the administration policy disagreements remained sharp and reflected bureaucratic process as well as ideological preference, but the latter appeared to predominate. Many of President Bush’s top aides, as well as the president, were skeptical of the efficacy of negotiation and confident in the value of coercion. There also was an instinctive rejection of policies identified with the Clinton administration.

The administration eventually shifted direction. Even the war-minded president recognized that refusing to talk had been counterproductive. The North continued its nuclear activities and demonstrated no interest in stopping of its own accord. The Six-Party Talks opened in 2003 with indifferent results. By the second Bush term the administration adopted a less confrontational foreign policy in general and toward the DPRK in particular.¹⁴

Washington sought China's aid to moderate Pyongyang's behavior and initiated bilateral contacts with North Korea. Engagement mixed with sanctions yielded agreements in 2005 and 2007 but neither were full nor permanent compliance by the North. Administration missteps—for instance, originally insisting on disarmament before providing reciprocal benefits—may have hampered the two nations' potential journey along the diplomatic path. However, Pyongyang routinely failed to fulfill its commitments, which cast doubts on Kim Jong-il's willingness to give up the nuclear option under any circumstance.

Obama Administration Policy toward North Korea

This skepticism informed the incoming Obama administration's position on the North. In practice, no policy seemed to offer much chance of positive long-run results. While there was evidence that Pyongyang engaged in more provocative behavior when it was not involved in negotiations with the U.S., neither coercion nor engagement appeared to offer much prospect of permanently eliminating North Korea's nuclear program.

Whatever the possibility of talking Kim out of his nuclear materials a decade or more prior, that moment had passed. It would naturally be more difficult to convince him to abandon whatever nuclear materials and weapons he had amassed at great expense. Moreover, Kim's illness, which weakened him physically and politically, and the impending leadership change, suggested that forging a far-reaching settlement, which almost certainly would be opposed by the military, was even less likely. While there were steps short of denuclearization which would promote a more stable and peaceful peninsula—freezing future nuclear production, limiting ballistic missiles, undertaking conventional confidence building measures—the North's provocative behavior made them all less achievable. In fact, three days before Barack Obama's inauguration the North Korean foreign ministry announced “that we can live without normalizing the relations with the U.S. but not without nuclear deterrent.”¹⁵

Dealing with the DPRK looked to be a largely no-win proposition, guaranteed to be frustrating at best and costly at worst. The Obama administration had numerous domestic priorities. President Obama's top concern was the economy, dealing with a painful recession and enacting regulatory reforms in response to the financial crisis. Moreover, the president and Congress spent roughly a year battling over health care

reform, resulting in passage of this signature legislation. Growing political difficulties resulted in a Republican takeover of the House and major Republican gains in the Senate in the 2010 elections, which further complicated the president's political task. As 2011 dawned the lengthy presidential campaign cycle in America was about to begin anew. There was little likely gain from spending time and effort on North Korea.

Moreover, the administration faced several foreign policy issues which competed for attention with and often appeared to take priority over dealing with Pyongyang. The president twice increased force levels in Afghanistan, managed a troop drawdown from Iraq, ramped up anti-terrorism drone campaigns in Pakistan and Yemen, and intervened militarily in Libya. He initiated a "reset" of relations with Russia¹⁶ and engaged China over economic and security issues. Peace between Israel and the Palestinians remained as elusive as ever, while he tightened sanctions and threatened war against Iran over its nuclear program. The economic crisis in Europe had significant foreign policy as well as economic ramifications.

Nevertheless, when the Obama administration took office there was some hope for dialogue with the North. New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, trusted by the North because of his time as United Nations ambassador, was supposed to join the Cabinet as Commerce Secretary (his nomination was derailed by unrelated issues).¹⁷ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton indicated a willingness to consider bilateral talks. However, the administration appointed Stephen W. Bosworth as part-time North Korean expert, which suggested a reduced emphasis on DPRK issues. Moreover, for whatever reason—perhaps retaliating for administration criticism or delays in engagement, or hoping to increase concessions—Pyongyang quickly returned to its policy of brinkmanship.

The chief result was to drive the administration away from dialogue with the North and toward a stronger relationship with both with both Seoul and Tokyo. In the former the new, conservative Lee Myung-bak government reversed the so-called Sunshine Policy, cutting aid and criticizing Pyongyang; the North responded with vitriol and threats.

As intra-Korean relations deteriorated, the U.S. and South Korea emphasized "strategic patience," going slow with and seeking to wait out the North, or at least the latter's latest temper tantrums. The administration also pressed China and Russia to take tougher action against Pyongyang. The sinking of the *Cheonan* and artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 sparked increased U.S.-South Korean

military cooperation. The North mixed conciliatory gestures with provocative attacks, and indicated its interest in dialogue with the U.S., but the administration responded that bilateral talks could only occur within the context of renewed Six-Party Talks.

This process continued through 2011. Analysts debated whether Pyongyang desired confrontation or calm for this year's celebration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of founding dictator Kim Il-sung: either conceivably could be used in an attempt to demonstrate that the DPRK had become a powerful and prosperous country, as promised.

Nevertheless, last year the Obama administration offered cooperation. While refusing to provide additional food aid out of concern over inadequate monitoring, the administration offered flood relief assistance. The two nations restarted joint searches for the remains of American MIAs. The Lee government in Seoul moved in a similarly conciliatory direction.¹⁸

Most significant was the renewed dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang. Kim Jong-il's government suggested the possibility of denuclearization along with a peace treaty. Secretary Clinton stated that "We are open for talks with North Korea, but we do not intend to reward the North just for returning to the table."¹⁹ U.S. human rights envoy Robert King visited Pyongyang, and Stephen Bosworth held talks with North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye-Gwan.

The administration reacted with caution, as skepticism of the likely results was high both within and without the administration. Washington formally dismissed having talks for the sake of having talks and insisted on concrete North Korean concessions. At his October summit with President Lee President Obama announced that any DPRK "provocations will be met not with rewards but with even stronger sanctions and isolation."²⁰ Defense Secretary Leon Panetta visited the South shortly afterwards and publicly expressed "skepticism"²¹ about any revived talks. He also warned about possible North Korean provocations, promising "strong and effective responses."²²

Nevertheless, there was speculation that Pyongyang hoped for aid and other economic benefits to offer tangible benefits along with propaganda for the upcoming centennial celebration. The North may also have feared the prospect of a more hawkish Republican winning in November 2012. Negotiations were underway at the time of Kim Jong-il's death. Perhaps reflecting a collective leadership devoted to the status quo, the new regime in Pyongyang moved ahead without apparent

interruption. In February Washington and Pyongyang announced a deal involving U.S. aid and a North Korean promise to halt nuclear activities, including uranium enrichment, and eschew nuclear and missile tests, with a hoped for, if not necessarily expected, revival of the Six-Party Talks. Despite some optimistic outside punditry, the administration may have viewed the agreement primarily as a probe of the North's intentions: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called it "a modest first step in the right direction."²³

However, the DPRK promptly announced a planned satellite launch, which the Obama administration claimed violated the accord.²⁴ Washington's position was reasonable, but the agreement was ambiguous, and Pyongyang always had distinguished between missile tests and satellite launches. One theory was that, absent Kim's death, the agreement would have been inked in December, leaving several months of implementation before the North Korean announcement. Then, Kim may have figured, Washington would have hesitated to back away. Whatever the reason for the North's behavior—while generally in the wrong, Pyongyang is not without legitimate complaints about some U.S. and South Korean actions—there was neither aid nor a return to the negotiating table.

Nothing of note is expected to happen before the November election. The administration has no reason to expend political capital promoting a potentially controversial agreement of uncertain life with no prospect of political benefit.

A second Obama administration likely would emphasize continuity. Secretary Clinton's expected departure should have little impact on administration policy. The most recent negotiating disappointment reinforces already substantial skepticism about the likelihood of any enforceable nuclear deal with Pyongyang. There is little enthusiasm for inking limited accords with insufficient specificity and open to DPRK attempts to sell the same concession twice. However, few observers have confidence that the North is prepared to sign and implement a more comprehensive settlement, especially in the midst of an unclear and potentially destabilizing leadership struggle.

A second Obama administration likely would attempt to keep the DPRK talking and certainly would keep pushing Beijing to take a more positive role in promoting reform in the North. However, absent noticeable changes in approach in Pyongyang, President Obama would have little reason to raise the priority of North Korean issues.

Likely Romney Policy toward North Korea

Current Republican Party attitudes on foreign policy have been largely shaped in response to President Obama. In general, Mitt Romney and other opposition candidates have charged President Obama with showing weakness, apologizing for America, appeasing America's enemies, and threatening America's position in a dangerous world. The Republicans have tended to be low on specific solutions, instead promising to show "leadership," "rebuild" America's defenses, and demonstrate "resolve" against America's adversaries.²⁵

Romney was no different. He delivered a major foreign policy speech at the Citadel, a military-oriented college in South Carolina. Although he offered a litany of "grave threats" and potential disasters resulting from the administration's alleged failings, he did not include North Korea among them. He only brought up the DPRK alongside Cuba, Iran, and Venezuela as having "anti-America visions."²⁶ About these he only said American should be stronger. Romney also warned against a more powerful China, but drew no specific linkages to Pyongyang.

The Romney campaign's foreign policy White Paper, released last October, made similar points in greater detail. The DRPK was cited as a "rogue nation" causing "a special problem" by "seeking nuclear weapons." The solution, the campaign indicated, was demonstrating "clarity and resolve," maintaining "an international system that is congenial to the liberal institutions of open markets, representative government, and respect for human rights," applying "hard and soft power," and exercising alliance and multilateral "leadership." Pyongyang's nuclear program "is a serious menace to world peace," so a Romney administration "will make it unequivocally clear to Pyongyang that continued advance of its nuclear program and any aggression will be punished." Mr. Romney promised tougher sanctions, enforcement of the Proliferation Security Initiative, and increased pressure on "China to commit to North Korea's disarmament."²⁷

All told, a Romney administration likely would be more inclined to confront and less inclined to talk to the North, but the difference might be more in degree than kind. In contrast to Iran, Romney has not suggested that there is a military option in dealing with the DPRK. In principle, his specific policy prescriptions are consistent with the Obama administration's rejection of a nuclear North Korea, support for a tougher South Korean approach, reluctance to provide unconditioned aid, and

attempt to build regional and especially Chinese support for Washington's position.

Indeed, Romney's failure to pay much attention to the DPRK—in contrast, for instance, to his vocal saber-rattling directed at Iran—suggests a policy akin to the Obama administration's "strategic patience," of attempting to place the North on the back burner despite the threat that it might boil over now and again. Even the toughness projected by the putative GOP nominee is not foreordained, given the policy pirouettes he has exhibited elsewhere.

To the extent that the Republican Party affects Romney's approach, it will encourage confrontation. The only other GOP presidential candidate who talked specifically about North Korea was Newt Gingrich, who declared that the U.S. "will never, ever, be safe if the North Korean and Iranian dictatorships survive." In confronting them he promised to use "all the techniques that President Reagan, Prime Minister Thatcher, and Pope John Paul II used to destroy the Soviet empire," without specifying what that would mean for the North.²⁸

Although the former House speaker is unlikely to have much impact on a Romney presidency, other influential figures within the Republican Party could press for a more radical policy. For instance, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) will become chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee if the Republicans take control of the Senate. He has introduced legislation to penalize states, including the North, which aid Iranian nuclear weapons development.²⁹ He also has called for "regime change" in North Korea and said that the DPRK provided "a lesson" that the "continued appeasement of North Korea that we've done under both Republican and Democratic administrations" has failed.³⁰ He has backed away from his prior support for military action—while frequently urging war elsewhere, most recently in Syria. Sen. McCain also has advocated greater pressure on Beijing, declaring that China is the key to resolving the North Korea issue.

John Bolton, a former assistant secretary of state and United Nations ambassador, has become an influential foreign policy voice among Republicans; he also has been mentioned as a possible secretary of state in a Romney administration. He argued that resuming the Six-Party Talks was a "significant mistake," that the U.S. should isolate the North financially, prevent any weapons trade, pressure "China to adhere to existing U.N. sanctions," and "use whatever levers are available to undermine the regime." In his view, Washington also should prepare for

a North Korean collapse.³¹ Although Bolton has not suggested military action, he has contended that “North Korea’s global threat continues to metastasize,” citing Pyongyang’s nuclear program, missile development, and cyber attacks.³²

The Romney campaign has amassed a lengthy list of foreign policy advisers who tend to run from nationalist hawks to unreconstructed neoconservatives. Which of them exercises real influence, and would end up in appointive office if he wins, is not clear. Chairing the Asia-Pacific Working Group are Ken Lucken, a banker and campaign supporter; Evan Feigenbaum, a former Bush adviser now at the Eurasia Group, and Aaron Friedberg, a former Cheney aide now at Princeton.

Overall, a President Romney most likely would start out taking a hard-line, confrontational position. However, there is no reason to expect such a strategy to work any better than it did under President Bush, who terminated Clinton administration efforts at engagement. After isolation failed to yield any benefits—indeed, appeared to exacerbate the situation—even the once uncompromising Bush switched back to negotiation.

Past behavior suggests that Romney would be prone to move towards the center. He has a pragmatic reputation, routinely abandons previous positions taken, and has exhibited no expertise or interest in foreign affairs. Thus, he easily could drop his hawkish rhetoric and chart a more moderate international course. In the case of North Korea that might include some attempt at engagement through renewal of the Six-Party Talks and perhaps bilateral discussions as well. This inclination could be reinforced by the reality that the American people are most concerned about domestic issues, so it would be best for him to concentrate on economics and leave foreign policy issues to traditional Republican elites. Even so, it might take some time for a more moderate strategy to emerge out of more confrontational rhetoric.

However, such an outcome, while plausible, is not certain. Politics also could work the other way. Romney might actually believe his hawkish rhetoric. He also might decide that acting as a foreign policy hawk, especially on an issue where negotiations look unlikely to achieve much of substance, would give him political space to adopt a more moderate domestic policy. Indeed, that is the experience of the Bush presidency: political conservatives tended to forgive President George W. Bush for his spending excesses because of his persistent war-making. A President Romney might engage in saber-rattling in the Korean

peninsula and elsewhere to distract the conservative Republican base from compromises on health care, tax hikes, and other domestic policy issues.

U.S. Policy toward South Korea

Equally if not more important is the U.S.-South Korea relationship which, after all, was forged in response to North Korea. The two governments have been close since the ROK was founded in 1948. However, the nature of the relationship obviously has changed significantly.

For much of the ROK's history Seoul was simply a client state of the United States, subsidized, protected, and dominated by the superpower across the Pacific. With economic growth in the 1970s and democratic transformation in the 1980s the South gained both the capability and will to assert itself in the relationship. That has continued into the 21st Century as Seoul seeks to play a regional and even global role.

Until recently there was little difference in approach to Pyongyang, though significant disagreements during the Nixon and Carter administrations arose over Washington's attempt to reduce its military commitment to the South. The Clinton administration was more willing to contemplate military action against the DPRK nuclear program than South Korean President Kim Young-sam, but that issue never came to fruition. With the Agreed Framework, Washington shifted toward peaceful engagement with the North.

However, the election of Kim Dae-jung as ROK president triggered broader disagreements. Presidents Kim and Clinton formed a personal bond, but the former's "Sunshine Policy" outran Washington's willingness to make concessions to the DPRK. A worse collision occurred with U.S. President Bush, who, as noted earlier, declared the North to be a member of the "axis of evil" and expressed his "loathing" for Kim Jong-il.⁸ President Bush overruled Secretary of State Colin Powell, who had planned on picking up U.S. policy toward Pyongyang largely where the Clinton administration had left it.

Bilateral ties were similarly strained after the election of Roh Moo-hyun, though by then the Bush administration had moderated its approach toward the North. If Washington was prepared to negotiate, it still did not appreciate a South Korean policy which veered toward appeasement. Although President Roh affirmed the importance of the bilateral alliance, his past criticism of the U.S. was not easily forgotten.

He made a poor partner for a U.S. president who tended to personalize relationships with foreign leaders. (It is important not to overstate the rift: the two governments worked together on a number of important issues, including negotiating a Free Trade Agreement, sending ROK troops to Iraq, and adjusting U.S. force deployments. On the first two issues, at least, President Roh offended many of those who voted him into office.³³

President Lee Myung-bak took office as the Bush administration was winding down. However, he proved to be a favored partner of President Obama. The latter paired caution for engaging the North with enthusiasm for strengthening ties with the South. In 2010 President Obama cited “the extraordinary friendship and alliance between our two countries” and “reaffirmed the importance of our military alliance.”³⁴ Last fall the administration provided exemplary hospitality to President Lee in the first ROK state visit in a decade.

These close ties reflected the two governments’ general agreement on strategy toward Pyongyang. Both favored a tough response to the North’s nuclear and missile tests and other North Korean provocations, advocated reduced aid to the DPRK and increased cooperation to constrain the North, pressed China to pressure Pyongyang, and promoted a broader vision for the alliance. Washington strongly backed the ROK after the sinking of the *Cheonan* and shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, even sparking China’s displeasure by sending an aircraft carrier into the Yellow Sea for joint military exercises. The Obama administration also moved ahead with weapons sales, including surveillance drones.

Moreover, Washington saw the ROK as an important partner in regional and potentially global roles. The Bush administration favored turning the bilateral alliance into strategic cooperation, which was followed by the Obama administration’s famed “pivot” toward Asia.³⁵ Although the Obama administration emphasized maritime containment (without using those words) of the People’s Republic of China—adding Marines to Australia and strengthening ties with the Philippines, for instance—South Korea is seen as another critical Asian partner to promote larger objectives. While Seoul is unlikely to make the PRC into a permanent enemy by formally joining an anti-China grouping, the U.S. hopes for support if ill contingencies arise. So long as the discussion is general, specific policy differences can be kept to a minimum.

This doesn’t mean there haven’t been disagreements between the governments, including over the Status of Forces Agreement, range

limits on South Korean missiles, burden sharing, basing issues, arms purchases, and beef imports.³⁶ However, the current governments have been in general accord over security policy, especially dealing with the North.

That could change, however, depending on events in Seoul. The outcome of the South Korean election in December could have a significant impact on U.S.-ROK ties. No doubt, whoever is elected president will support the alliance, and especially the American promise to defend the South from North Korea. (South Korean progressives have a notably less positive view of the U.S. than do conservatives, but liberal leaders, such as Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, have consistently backed the security relationship.) However, the approach to Pyongyang could change, as it did with the elections of Kim Dae-jung and Lee Myung-bak, in particular.

It seems more dangerous to predict the outcome of the South Korean presidential election than that in America. In the latter the candidates are known and the parties are stable. Not so in the ROK. While the National Assembly election results burnished the reputation of Saenuri Party chairwoman, and likely presidential candidate, Park Geun-hye, they also might spur the opposition Democratic United Party to moderate its leftward tilt in the fall campaign. Indeed, Saenuri lost the proportional representation poll while winning a majority of single member districts.³⁷ Thus, the presidential race likely will be competitive and unpredictable.

Politics in Seoul could result in a muddle: an independent president of few known positions or an as yet unchosen moderate liberal with a legislature narrowly controlled by moderate conservatives. Domestic infighting could worsen if the president attempted a significant shift leftward.

The election of an opposition candidate as president, if committed to a significant softening towards the DPRK, also could create bilateral tensions with the U.S., even moving the alliance back toward the difficult times of President Bush's relationship with Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. As noted earlier, the Obama and Lee governments have worked together particularly well because they agreed on policy. If Washington leans toward confrontation while Seoul moves toward expanded engagement, the relationship could become rocky and cooperation regarding North Korea could deteriorate.

Although President Obama was elected as a liberal, his foreign policy represents the hawkish rather than pacifist variant of modern American liberalism. Moreover, while less dedicated to unilateralism than his predecessor, President Obama still is willing to play tough with friends. His administration has demonstrated ill-concealed contempt for allied states seen as weak or unhelpful, such as some in Europe. The Obama administration used extraordinary pressure, even helping to oust a prime minister, to force the Japanese government to violate its promise to the people of Okinawa to reduce the burden of U.S. bases.³⁸ If a new government in Seoul either restarted a new version of the Sunshine Policy or distanced itself from Washington's larger Asia-Pacific objectives, the Obama administration would not likely respond well.

Of course, the new South Korean government could take a more aggressive stance toward the DPRK. That seems less likely, since President Lee has been criticized for being too uncompromising even by members of his own party, such as Park Geun-hye. At least partly in response, President Lee moderated his own policy, allowing some aid for North Korea and pursuing talks with the Kim regime. (So far, little has come from this attempt at "legacy diplomacy." Pyongyang scaled up its personal attacks on President Lee after he failed, in its view, to show appropriate respect after the death of Kim Jong-il. The North has been little kinder to Ms. Park.)³⁹ Moreover, despite its loss in the National Assembly election, the South Korean opposition, which is less hostile to the North, gained ground.

However, additional predictably unpredictable provocations by the DPRK might radicalize the South Korean people and whatever government takes over, especially since even President Lee has had little success in holding Pyongyang accountable for its crimes. Popular attitudes have shifted before and could move again, especially in the case of North Korean military action.

This could create tensions with the Obama administration of a different kind. For instance, a number of South Koreans have suggested reintroducing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the ROK to deter the North.⁴⁰ (A separate, and obviously far more controversial issue, is the suggestion that Seoul match the DPRK by developing its own independent nuclear deterrent.) This would not be an easy step for the Obama administration to take, since it has advocated the ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons.

Moreover, the administration is committed to no first use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states in compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Although the North does not fit that category, the administration still might hesitate to initiate first use against a state with at most limited nuclear capabilities and uncertain delivery capabilities, so long as the latter does not attempt to start a nuclear war.

One issue on which a Romney administration likely would agree with the administration is the importance of maintaining and strengthening the alliance with the ROK. For instance, the campaign White Paper has declared: “As the United States invigorates our relationships with South Korea, Japan, and others, and increases our collective military presence and cooperation, it should demonstrate to the Chinese that they should join the coordinated effort or be left behind as a regional counter-proliferation partner.”⁴¹ Romney has emphasized U.S. leadership: “America leads the free world and the free world leads the entire world.”⁴² With his support for military force and confrontation, Romney likely would see South Korea as a key partner in dealing with both the North and China.

This policy would be supported by other Republican Party elites. For instance, Sen. McCain declared: “Under the strong leadership of President Lee Myung-bak, the Republic of Korea is realizing its goal of becoming a responsible global leader, and our alliance is flourishing as a result.”⁴³ John Bolton criticized the Obama administration for putting pressure on the Lee government to resume the Six-Party Talks.

Like President Obama, a President Romney probably would react negatively to the election of a more leftish government in Seoul. Again, the latter has no track record in office. However, taking his policy prescriptions at face value, he likely would expect ROK support for an aggressively confrontational policy with North Korea. Denied that support, he probably would act unilaterally when he thought advisable, apply pressure on Seoul to win compliance, and, if the latter failed, shift his attention to more compliant governments in the region.

Other issues also may bedevil the relationship. For instance, two recent rapes raised the question of the Status of Forces Agreement covering U.S. troops, who act as America’s traditional “tripwire” in the South.⁴⁴ While leading Republican candidates have said nothing on this issue, numerous Republicans criticized the Obama administration for not reaching a SOFA with Iraq to maintain U.S. forces there.⁴⁵ The sticking point was the liability of American troops under Iraqi law. Republican

presidential candidates have suggested that “leadership” could have resolved that issue, but avoided answering the question whether they would be willing to make concessions to preserve the U.S. force presence. A new Republican president might feel more pressure to comply with Seoul’s demands for SOFA changes, at least so long as the South Korean government backed U.S. policy.

A Romney administration also would be more likely to reintroduce U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, if requested. He has emphasized firmness against the DPRK and other American adversaries and is not committed to the theoretical elimination of nuclear weapons, so he would have no obvious reason to say no.

Finally, a Romney presidency could have a negative impact on South Korean attitudes toward the U.S., especially Washington as an alliance partner and regional leader. The popular view has waxed and waned over time—inflamed by Washington’s support for military regimes, accidents and crimes involving U.S. military personnel, perceived American indifference to South Korean interests, and more. Of late, threats by Pyongyang and fears of Beijing have improved Washington’s relative standing. However, President Bush’s perceived bellicosity reduced America’s standing. If a Romney administration was seen as being unreasonably confrontational, bilateral tensions could rise even if there were few serious substantive differences between the two governments.

Conclusion

North Korea long has been called a land of bad options. The U.S. and South Korean governments have tried both confrontation and engagement, and neither strategy has succeeded in causing Pyongyang to yield up its nuclear materials or otherwise permanently moderate its behavior.

Upcoming elections in both the ROK and America are likely to affect allied policy toward the North. The Obama administration has only reluctantly pursued negotiations with the DPRK, which failed to fulfill prior agreements. However, the administration responded positively, if warily, to North Korea’s last campaign to restart negotiations, though that effort quickly collapsed with Pyongyang’s attempted satellite launch. Should President Obama be reelected, he probably would continue this process, while harboring few positive expectations. The administration might decide that it is important to

keep the North at the negotiating table, irrespective of the chance of actually reaching a permanent peace settlement.

Although Republican Party nominee Mitt Romney has said little specific about the Koreans, his rhetoric suggests that he would adopt a more confrontational stance toward Pyongyang. He has said nothing about striking militarily, but he probably would support additional sanctions on the North, attempt to interdict North Korean shipments abroad, and pressure Beijing to isolate the North further. Moreover, a President Romney probably would expect Seoul to support a more confrontational policy. In the short-term this could mean a more unpredictable and dangerous peninsula.

However, Mitt Romney's one political constant is policy inconstancy. He might abandon this approach even before he is inaugurated. Or he might join the Bush administration in changing course if confrontation failed to yield positive results.

Should elections move Seoul right, or, more likely, left, tensions also could rise within the U.S.-ROK relationship. Both President Obama and a President Romney likely would be less respectful of Seoul's opinion in the case of policy disagreements. The result could be reminiscent of the frosty relationships between the Bush and Kim/Roh governments.

Much is at stake for both South Korea and the U.S. in the upcoming presidential (and American congressional) elections. The poll results could affect both unity in addressing the challenge posed by North Korea as well as agreement over other issues. However, the two nations have weathered serious challenges to their relationship in the past. Whatever short-term turbulence results from the votes in November and December, the two nation's lengthy partnership likely will endure largely unscathed.

Notes:

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<http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/07/11/2891728/republicans-attack-obama-for-chavez.html> (Romney: Obama’s foreign policy shows a “pattern of weakness”).

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