

AMERICA'S MID-TERM ELECTIONS: WHAT NEXT FOR U.S.-SOUTH KOREAN RELATIONS?

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South Koreans unhappy with George W. Bush's North Korean policies may be tempted to applaud last month's Democratic takeover of Congress. They would be well advised to temper their enthusiasm.

True, the Democratic critique of the Bush administration's handling of the North Korean nuclear issue mirrors concerns held by many South Koreans, apparently including senior officials in President Roh Moo-hyun's government. Democratic criticisms have been straightforward and consistent (in marked contrast to the war in Iraq, where Democrats over the years have been no more united than Republicans). In an argument running back to the early days of the Bush presidency, Democrats have called for greater flexibility in dealing with the North, and urged a more comprehensive approach to negotiations with the North that emphasizes carrots as well as sticks. They have also insisted that Washington should be prepared to engage in bilateral talks with Pyongyang (both within the framework of multilateral talks, and outside such multilateral discussions), in contrast to the Bush administration's resistance to bilateral talks.

Democratic victories in November's off-year elections will give new prominence to some of Bush's harshest critics. California Democrat Tom Lantos will be the new chair of the House of Representatives International Relations Committee (which may revert to its former name, the Foreign Affairs Committee). Lantos has never disguised his unhappiness with Bush's approach toward North Korea. He has charged that State Department negotiators have been undercut in their diplomacy by "hardliners" associated with Vice President Dick Cheney and recently-departed Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (who, even though his name did not appear on any ballot, was a prominent casualty of the dissatisfaction displayed by American voters last month). In a congressional hearing in mid-November, Lantos declared that the administration's refusal to allow U.S. diplomats to visit North Korea "must end, and it must end now."¹ Lantos, who has visited the North on several occasions, has also said that he is "passionately committed to having a dialogue with people we disagree with."²

In the Senate, Delaware Democrat and presidential aspirant Joseph Biden will chair the Foreign Relations Committee. Biden shares Lantos' disdain for Bush's North Korea policy and has been one of the president's most persistent critics on North Korean issues over the years. It is a safe bet that Biden, Lantos, and other Democrats who share their views will use their newly acquired power to call congressional hearings, ask tough questions, and exercise the sort of demanding oversight that recent Republican-led Congresses largely shunned.

Yet, it is almost certainly incorrect to expect that Democratic control of Congress will compel a reluctant Bush to negotiate more seriously with North Korea. In the American form of government, the executive branch enjoys immense powers in the realm of

foreign policy and national security, and a Democratic Congress will find it difficult to force a determined White House to change its approach toward North Korea. The president, who has exercised his veto authority only once in six years, would surely veto any legislation mandating fundamental change in his North Korean policy. Unless large numbers of Republican legislators broke with the president, congressional Democrats would not have the votes to overturn the veto.

Nor is the veto the only foreign policy power available to the White House. Congress may be able to force Bush to appoint a North Korean Policy Coordinator (as indeed, Congress did earlier this fall). But Bush retains the power to select the coordinator, and can be counted upon to appoint someone who will support the administration's preferences.

So, contrary to the hopes of many South Koreans, Democratic control of Congress is not likely to produce a dramatic change in U.S. policy toward North Korea. South Korean news accounts that portray the election results as a "victory of doves, which prefer conversation to confrontation,"³ ignore an important point: Democrats as well as Republicans believe that North Korea's nuclear test earlier this fall requires a firm international response, including stepped-up activities to intercept North Korean transfers of dangerous weapons and related technology. And Democrats are every bit as committed as Bush to the goal of a nuclear-free Korean peninsula.

In this sense, there may be less policy space between Republicans and Democrats than between Washington and Seoul—an assessment strengthened by the apparent failure by Bush and Roh during their meetings in Hanoi last month to narrow the gap between their approaches toward Pyongyang. The Roh government has explicitly said that it will not join U.S.-led interdiction efforts to tighten the pressure on North Korea. "We will continue to maintain the relations with North Korea in a friendly manner . . .," Roh declared some weeks after the North Korean nuclear test. "We won't put anything above peace."⁴ Democrats as well as Republicans are likely to find Seoul's approach to the North one-sided and, insofar as South Korean policies assist Pyongyang to resist international pressures, inimical to the achievement of a nuclear-free Korean peninsula.

Ultimately, then, Seoul is likely to find Democratic criticisms of Bush's North Korea policies a double-edged sword. South Koreans will applaud the Democrats' insistence that the United States display greater flexibility in dealing with Pyongyang. But—unless the North has an utterly unanticipated change of heart and decides to give up its growing nuclear capabilities—Seoul will discover that calls by the Democrats for more sustained U.S. attention to the North Korea challenge will inevitably incorporate a hard-edged component as well as a diplomatic track.

U.S.-Korean Free Trade Agreement

In the area of trade, on the other hand, South Korean commentary on the Democrats' electoral victories last month has been considerably darker. Democratic successes have been portrayed as confirmation of the growing strength of trade protectionism in the United States. With the U.S. and South Korean governments locked in tough negotiations looking toward the conclusion of a free trade agreement (FTA)—which

will require congressional approval—some South Koreans worry that any agreement ultimately negotiated might fall victim to protectionist sentiment on Capitol Hill. But here as well, South Korean assessments do not fully understand the complexity of the American political environment.

The belief that Democrats lean toward protectionism is not entirely without foundation. It is true that many Democratic lawmakers are skeptical of the merits of liberalized trade in the absence of adequate protections for workers whose jobs are lost due to rising imports. Democratic legislators have also insisted that trade pacts contain greater environmental protections than many foreign governments have been prepared to accept. Some Democrats are openly hostile to unbridled globalization.

Nonetheless, the cliché that Democrats are protectionist grossly overstates Democratic support for economic unilateralism. “Globalization is here to stay,” says Michigan Democrat Rep. Sander Levin. “But you have to work with it. You just don’t let it happen.”⁵ What most Democrats want is not a withdrawal from the global economy, but an end to the patently unfair trade practices followed by many nations—and of which Korea has its share. American automakers, beef exporters, rice farmers, and pharmaceutical firms—regardless of political affiliation—all believe that Korean policies place unwarranted barriers in the way of American exports.

Moreover, skepticism about the virtues of free trade is not restricted to Democrats. GOP votes helped derail a Vietnam trade deal last month that Bush badly wanted before visiting Hanoi (and which subsequently secured congressional approval, with support from both sides of the aisle). Republican legislators from the Carolinas are loath to give foreign textiles greater access to the U.S. market, yet in the current U.S.-ROK negotiations, South Korean textile makers are asking for immediate abolition of most U.S. tariffs.

Last month’s congressional elections are important, however, in that they give new power—in the form of committee and subcommittee chairmanships—to prominent Democratic lawmakers who insist that Korean economic policies place American businesses and workers at an unfair disadvantage. In this sense, Michigan, where the powerhouse automobile industry has been hard hit by slumping sales and downsizing, and where organized labor is a major political force and an important Democratic ally, was a big winner last month. The Midwest state will find itself with considerably enhanced political clout next year as a result of the change in control of Congress.

Michigan’s John Dingell is slated to regain the chair of the Energy and Commerce Committee, which he headed for many years prior to the Republican takeover of the House in 1994. Sander Levin appears set to become the new chair of the Trade Subcommittee of the powerful Ways and Means Committee, a position that will make him perhaps the most influential voice on trade matters in the House. In a December 4, 2006, letter to U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) Susan Schwab, Dingell and Levin, along with Michigan’s two Democratic senators, Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow, warned the administration not to take congressional approval of any U.S.-ROK FTA for granted. “Korea maintains the most closed auto market in the industrialized world,” the lawmakers wrote. If a “satisfactory resolution to Korea’s closed auto and auto parts markets is not achieved, we will strongly and actively oppose the agreement.”

And in a passage that is certain to evoke anxiety in Seoul, the legislators declared that *before* the United States agrees to preferential access for Korean vehicles and auto parts, Seoul “must first demonstrate that its market is open by reaching and *sustaining* specific and measurable improvements in import sales.”⁶ If the letter’s authors are serious about this sequencing, they may have raised the bar higher than Korea will be prepared to jump.

Here again, however, it is possible to read too much into Democratic electoral triumphs. It is, after all, the Bush administration, not Congress, that has responsibility for hammering out the details of the FTA. And even before last month’s elections, Bush’s USTR negotiators had been anything but pushovers for Korean interests. Indeed, independent trade analysts had become increasingly skeptical that the two sides would be able to come to terms in time to present a deal to Congress before the expiration next July of the executive branch’s fast-track authority (renamed TPA, or trade promotion authority). The prospect of a Democratic Congress will undoubtedly give USTR another lever in its trade talks with the Koreans, but there is no reason to believe that absent Democratic electoral successes last month, the White House would have capitulated to strong-arming by Korean negotiators.

A Mixed Result

For South Korea, then, and for the Korean-American alliance, the November 2006 congressional elections carry something of a mixed message. The good news is that Democrats insist that they are just as committed as Republicans to a strong U.S.-ROK partnership, and there is no reason to doubt their word. On the difficult trade front, Democratic electoral victories are not going to unleash the tide of protectionism that many South Koreans appear to fear.

The bad news for South Korea is that Congress’s newly empowered Democrats are likely to push a trade agenda that will inevitably place new strains on the U.S.-Korean partnership. Nor will this burden be balanced by a Democrat-imposed U.S. policy toward North Korea more to Seoul’s liking, since a Democratic Congress is not going to have nearly the moderating impact on Bush’s North Korea policy that many South Koreans hope for.

What South Koreans insufficiently appreciate is that the outcome of the American congressional elections is not nearly as important to the future of the bilateral partnership as are decisions taken in South Korea. If the two allies continue to find themselves at odds on North Korea policy, this is going to be far more detrimental to the alliance than anything that happens in the American electoral sphere. And if Roh is unable to build a political consensus behind reasonable and fair compromises in the FTA negotiations, the electoral success of one American political party or the other will be irrelevant; neither U.S. party will be interested in an agreement that is perceived as patently one-sided.

Rather than fretting about American elections in which they have no voice, South Koreans would do well to spend more energy on decisions in Seoul they can hope to influence. And if, as a result, they get South Korean policy right, this is sure to have a beneficial impact on U.S.-South Korean relations as well.

¹ Glenn Kessler, “Democrats Blast Bush Policy on N.Korea,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 16, 2006.

² Glenn Kessler, “Democrats May Urge More Contact With U.S. Adversaries,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 10, 2006.

³ “Change in America: For Better or Worse, a Chance for Diplomacy,” *Korea Times*, Nov. 9, 2006, in http://search.hankooki.com/times/times_view.php?term=victory++of+doves+%2Cwhichprefer++&path=hankooki3/times/lpage/opinion/200611/kt2006110917573654040.htm&media=kt.

⁴ “Seoul will remain ‘friendly,’” *International Herald Tribune*, Nov. 3, 2006.

⁵ Deb Price, “Levin flexes muscle on trade,” *Detroit News*, Sept. 8, 2006, in http://www.house.gov/list/hearing/mi12_levin/morenews/ar090806.html

⁶ Thanks to veteran Asia-watcher Chris Nelson for bringing the existence of this letter to light. The italics are mine.