

The North Korea's Nuclear Test and US's North Korea Policy

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On October 3, North Korea announced its plans for a nuclear weapons test, and conducted the test on October 9. How is the test affecting US's policy towards North Korea? The followings are answers to five different questions concerning this issue.

The first question is whether the US is paying more attention to North Korea in terms of policy because of the test. The answer is negative. Iraq remains US's highest policy priority. Then, will this change if North Korea conducts a second nuclear weapons test or launches more missiles? The answer is still no.

After 9-11, the war against terror and the war in Iraq have been US's top foreign policy agenda. The US has not wished for an escalation of tension in North Korea, so that it could stay focused on Iraq and on terror. In this context, Northeast Asian issues, especially those concerning North Korea, were practically entrusted to China. This basic framework will not change after North Korea's nuclear test, and is unlikely to change in future.

But there are two aspects that could change. One, which will be elaborated further below, is that due to the test the US has now seized the opportunity to isolate North Korea even further, and will be willing to actively exploit it. This is a departure from its passive attitude in the past, where the US was more inclined to neglect problems caused by North Korea.

Another aspect is that North Korea is increasingly turning into an object of policy bargaining between the US and China due to the fact that the US is unwilling to deal directly with North Korea but relations between China and North Korea are deteriorating. The future of North Korea and the Kim Jong Il regime is currently a frequent topic of conversation between the US and China. US officials are also expressing its desire to "respect China's interests."

Second, has US foreign policy towards North Korea failed because of the test? The answer is both yes and no. If US's primary goal was to prevent North Korea from obtaining a nuclear weapon, then the policy has failed. However, if the objective of the Bush administration was to isolate North Korea and ultimately make it surrender, then the policy is a partial success.

From US's standpoint, the effect that North Korea's test will have on the political landscape of Northeast Asia is not entirely negative. North Korea's launching of missiles in July achieved exactly what the US has wanted, i.e. to isolate North Korea even further from the international community, and the recent test has solidified this trend. It has also opened up the possibility that China and South Korea would alter their positions towards North Korea, and that Japan will increase its armaments expenditure. Also, the controversy surrounding the potential of Japan going nuclear is heating up. The US is now in a more advantageous stance where it can use the nature and intensity of Japan's reaction to North Korea's test as a leverage in dealing with China, and has grasped the opportunity to increase military cooperation and to strengthen alliance with Japan, which faced now with nuclear North Korea. These circumstances have given more leeway to the US in the handling of the political order of the Northeast Asian landscape.

Third, what will happen if the Democrats have a clear victory in the mid-term elections in November and claim a majority in both the House of Representatives and the Senate? Will the Bush administration be pressured into changing its North Korea policy? If a new North Korea policy coordinator is appointed within the government to review its policy after the mid-term elections, will this affect North Korea policy?

The answer to this question is not positive. It is true that there is a heated debate on North Korea's nuclear test between the Democrats and the Republicans as campaign talking points. The Democrats say that North Korea conducted the test because the Bush administration has neglected the problems and refused to talk directly with the country. The Republicans counter that the ultimate culprit is the failure of the Clinton administration's North Korea policy. But the impact that the North Korean nuclear test will have on US's mid-term election would be negligible.

If the Democrats take control of either the House or the Senate, then it is certain that there will be increased pressure from the Democrats on the administration, such as hearings on Bush's current policies. But the issues that are most likely on top of the legislature's agenda are Iraq strategies, homeland security, and reconstruction of the damage done by hurricane Katrina. In other words, the North Korean nuclear issue is not a major topic of interest for the Congress.

A policy coordinator to review North Korea policy will be appointed by the president. Therefore his or her role would depend mostly on the president's intentions. But from president Bush's point of view, he would rather avoid being criticized about his North Korea policy and being forced to revise it. Therefore it is possible that a person as coordinator with competency and energy would not be appointed to the office. The Special Envoy on Human Rights in North Korea is such a position. This office is executed by a part-time employee with no expertise on or enthusiasm for the topic.

But there is a possibility that a senior official with influence is appointed due to a recommendation of Republican heavyweights, or Democratic pressure. This possibility could change the situation. But even this case has to be assessed within the following context.

Fourth, if the Democrats win the presidential election in 2008, will there be a substantial change in US's North Korea policy that will be based on direct, give-and-take negotiations between the US and North Korea? The answer to this question is also not entirely positive. One can assume that Iraq and the war against terror will continue to be US's top priority. This does not mean that North Korea is the third on the list.

But assuming that a senior policy coordinator for North Korea policy is appointed, then the first problem that he or she will confront is the fact that the general American public views Kim Jong Il as an 'evil' or criminal on par with Osama bin Laden. North Korea's records on human rights, money counterfeiting, drug trafficking, abduction, and other problems, together with Kim Jong Il's rogue image, are constantly being presented through the US mass media. Considering this perception of the American public, it will be difficult for anyone to yield to North Korean demands (that will be at least minimally satisfactory to them). The Democrats would want to put all the issues on the table including nuclear weapons, human rights, counterfeiting, drug trafficking, and abduction issues to solve them 'with one clean sweep' by dealing directly with North Korea, but will be eager to show that they are not any softer than the Republicans. In addition, the Democrats' negotiation strategy would draw a so-called 'red line' that will allow them not to rule out military action if North Korea ever crosses it.

Another problem is that a Democratic controlled the US would want a complete and clean solution to the North Korean issue, but will still be unwilling to pay for the cost itself. Then who will pay? Will it be a repetition of the past where the US and North Korea have bilateral talks, while South Korea and Japan stay outside waiting to receive their bills? Or (since the Six-party Talks were held), will the US prefer a framework that includes South Korea and Japan? Then how will it be different from the previous Six-party Talks?

Fifth, then what significance does North Korea's nuclear weapon have to the US? The current level of sophistication of the weapons is not a threat to the US. This will remain true as long as North Korea does not attempt to transfer the nuclear material and technology to other parts of the world. But the consensus is that North Korea will not try to transfer it abroad with its current capacity. This is because the amount of nuclear material in North Korea's possession is not enough to give away to others, and even if it wants to, it will not risk retaliation in the process.

But if North Korea resumed construction of a 50 megawatt reactor, this could become a target of pre-emptive precision strike. Such a reactor signifies a mass production of nuclear material, so the reason for an attack is clear as well as the target. Also, if the US concludes that North Korea possesses the means to transport the nuclear weapons that can threaten American soil, it will start to take the issue very seriously.

Therefore, US's real interest lies not in North Korea's nuclear weaponry itself, but the possible impact it may have on international politics in Northeast Asia and global non-proliferation. Its reaction to North Korea's nuclear weapons would immediately affect the behavior of Iran. Therefore the US must show that countries like North Korea and Iran will pay a dear price if they try to obtain nuclear weapons.

The next step for the US would be to make sure that Japan does not overreact. As mentioned above, an appropriate response to the North Korea's nuclear test will consolidate the US-Japan alliance, as well as provide a reason for Japan to increase its military expenditure, thereby strengthening US's check on China through Japan. It is up to the US to prevent Japanese overreaction and ease its anxieties.

But if Japan would not completely trust US's promises and leans toward nuclear armament, then the alliance between the two countries will be endangered, while causing China and South Korea to heighten alert against Japan. This will inevitably lead to a weakening of US's influence in Northeast Asia.