

U. S. Mid-term Election Results and Prospects for North Korean Policy

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U.S. mid-term elections were held on November 7, newly bringing into office 435 members in the House of Representatives, 33 in the Senate, and 36 governors. The Democrats won a huge victory in that they acquired 234 seats in the House, 28 governorships, and a de facto majority in the Senate as well.

This mid-term election was in fact a vote of confidence for Bush's presidency, and by losing he will be left with a weakened political position, and face increased pressure over domestic and foreign policies. President Bush has acknowledged that loss of confidence over the situation in Iraq is the main cause of the defeat in the elections, and has sent a message of reconciliation towards the Democrats, saying that he is willing to cooperate with Congress to adjust policies.

The Democrats have criticized the Bush administration for refusing to accept bilateral talks with North Korea and thereby exacerbating the North Korean nuclear issue for the past six years. When the 110th Congress opens next year, the Democrats are expected to demand the administration to expand direct contact with North Korea and start negotiating more actively with the country. But the Democratic party is also emphasizing a complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of North Korea's nuclear program, and is maintaining a firm stance on the country's human rights issue as well.

If the Bush administration accepts the demands of the Democrat-led Congress concerning North Korea, the possibility is that U.S.'s North Korean policy will adopt a more flexible approach. It will likely increase direct contact between the two countries, while maintaining the basic position of bilateral meetings within the broader framework of Six-Party Talks. But the Democrats are also skeptical of North Korea's negotiating behavior, therefore the United Nations Security Council's sanctions against the country will continue.

The 2007 National Defense Authorization Act, which took effect on October 17, provides that a North Korea policy coordinator must be appointed within 60 days, and the coordinator must submit an assessment report on North Korean policy to the president and Congress within 90 days. Therefore, President Bush is likely to appoint a person to this new position who is acceptable to the Democrats. In a way similar to what the former North Korea policy coordinator Perry has done during the Clinton administration, the coordinator will visit the countries taking part in the Six-Party Talks and pursue bilateral talks between the U.S. and North Korea.

In preparation for President Bush's new coordinator appointment, the Korean government must plan carefully in advance to reflect our policy views into the coordinator's North Korean policy assessment process. It is also important to consider the possibility that North Korea could calculate that the Bush administration will become a lame duck prematurely after its defeat in the mid-term elections, and will try to delay the Six-Party Talks to strengthen its position when negotiating with the U.S.