

Outlook on the Second-Term Obama Administration's Policy towards North Korea

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Conflicting Views

In the 2012 U.S. presidential election, President Barack Obama prevailed and has been reelected to a second term. Following President Obama's successful reelection, South Koreans are now focused on the prospective U.S. policy on the Korean Peninsula, particularly in regard to North Korea, for the next four years. In South Korea, there are conflicting views in that the Obama administration's second-term foreign policy towards the North will either maintain a hard-line equivalent to his first-term's policy of "strategic patience" or adopt a more flexible and cooperative policy in contrast to his first term. In short, it is likely that the Obama administration's second-term policy towards North Korea will combine "dialogue and pressure" based on "strategic patience" as a result of domestic and international factors. Thus, the Obama administration is expected to adopt a more flexible and moderate policy, which focuses more on "dialogue" over the previous hard-line approach.

Foreign Policy under the Obama Administration's Second Term

Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S.-China relationship has exhibited both competition and cooperation in the economic, military and security fields, and this pattern of coexistence between the two countries has been maintained as well throughout the first Obama administration. Under this circumstance, the U.S. is placed at a critical juncture in which it must

reframe its relationship with China under the newly inaugurated Xi Jinping leadership. If the second-term Obama administration adopts a hard-line policy towards the North and heightens tension in the region surrounding the Korean Peninsula, then it is likely that China is to engage in a confrontational stance against the U.S. This is due to the fact that China has close allied relationship with North Korea and assumes regional dominance as an important constituent of the G2. Thus, it is most likely that the second-term Obama administration will ultimately seek to develop cooperative ties with China and improve relations with North Korea through continued dialogues, which will avoid any rival competition with the new Chinese leadership by adopting a hard-line policy towards the North.

The U.S.'s relationship with South Korea will also provide the second-term Obama administration with a favorable environment to adopt an engagement policy towards North Korea. The policy positions of the two leading presidential candidates, Park Geun-hye and Moon Jae-in, have subtle differences in both candidates' stances towards the North in comparison to that of the Lee Myung-bak administration. However, both of their policy positions are expected to increase dialogue and compromise from the current hard-line policy towards the North. Regardless of the outcome of presidential election in December, the new South Korean government's North Korea policy is likely to emphasize dialogue and cooperation. Thus, it appears that the Obama administration, which has affirmed the U.S.-South Korea alliance and bilateral policy coordination, will seek to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue from a more flexible stance through policy coordination with South Korea. It will be difficult for the new Obama administration to simply maintaining the hard-line policy towards the North, which will not conform to the newly inaugurated South Korean administration.

In a broader perspective, the U.S. global strategy also coincides with the aforementioned stance on flexibility. Recently, the Obama administration affirmed its principles on a "pivot to Asia" and "strategic rebalancing" as the substance of its foreign policy under the recognition that Asia is the most crucial region for its national strategy as well as its military purpose in order to secure U.S. economic prosperity and security. The U.S. government also reconfirmed the initiatives that will strengthen the close and comprehensive cooperation with its existing allied nations, particularly in the spheres of diplomacy, economy and social development beyond military cooperation, through the maintenance of close security and cooperative relations. The crux of America's aggressive engagement policy on the Asian countries is a means to consolidate U.S. regional dominance through strengthening multilateral cooperation with the regional powers as well as promoting cooperation with its rival, China. Thus, in order to consolidate its regional influence, the U.S. will likely consider maintaining a stable environment for regional security through dialogue and cooperation rather than relying on a heightened sense of regional insecurity based on a hostile policy towards the North, which would be the most beneficial in contributing to its national interests.

The Domestic Environment of the Second-Term Obama Administration

In the Obama administration's first term, the policymakers in charge of U.S. policy on North Korea mostly consisted of hardliners. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, former Deputy Secretary of State James

Steinberg, Senior Director for Asian Affairs on the National Security Council Jeffrey Bader and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell are among the list. These hardliners took control of the Obama administration's policy on North Korea and represented the so-called "strategic patience" in the first term. However, it is expected that there will be a reshuffling of those in charge of the policy on North Korea in the State Department, including the Secretary of State, in the second-term Obama administration. Currently, Senator John Kerry and the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice are top two candidates positioned to succeed Clinton, and in particular, Senator John Kerry has actively called for high-level dialogue with North Korea. If he is confirmed to be the next Secretary of State, then an engagement policy towards the North, which emphasizes dialogue and cooperation, is likely to gain traction in the second term of the Obama administration.

Finally, considering the nature of U.S. politics, former presidents who won reelections have shown greater conviction in implementing foreign policies during their second term, unaffected by any external influences, such as the public opinion and Congress. This has been possible since they were no longer under pressure to win the presidential election for the second term. Thus, the reelected presidents generally have a greater tendency to achieve their policy goals in their second term. This is due to the fact that it is difficult to accomplish any short-term achievements in domestic affairs, including the economic issue, and many reelected presidents strive for diplomatic achievements. Former president Bill Clinton concluded the U.S.-North Korea Joint Communiqué in 2000 and developed negotiations on the Missile Guidelines during his second term. Former president George W. Bush also took steps with North Korea in his second term, such as holding the February 13 Agreement and the October 3 Agreement in 2007 and removing it from the List of State Sponsors of Terrorism in 2008, and solemnly pledged to improve relations with North Korea. In the same vein, it is highly probable that President Obama will also actively participate in negotiations with the North during his second term in order to produce any tangible achievements in foreign policy.

Everything Hinges on North Korea's Decisions

Due to the diverse environmental and political factors at home and abroad, it is likely that the Obama administration will adopt an engagement policy towards North Korea in order to resolve the North's nuclear issue and improve relations through active dialogue instead of the so-called "strategic patience" hard-line policy, which used to be the main policy in the first term. It is important to keep in mind that if there are any signs of change whatsoever in the North, then the possibilities of policy change will also increase. On the contrary, the Obama administration will have reached the limits of its engagement policy, should there be no signs or positive responses from North Korea. Ultimately, it is the de facto changes, or at least its possibilities to changes in North Korea, that will ultimately determine the direction of U.S. policymaking. © KINU 2012

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