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The U.S. Foreign Policy after the Midterm Elections Based on Its North Korea Policy

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In general, domestic issues are major issues at stake in the U.S. midterm elections. This 2018 midterm elections also had a wide range of controversial issues, such as health care, widening wealth disparity, illegal immigrants, and issues of a minority involving race. Such major issues at stake are related to fundamentally differing views on how the taxpayers' money should be spent and what the welfare state should look like as illustrated in countless other U.S. elections. On the contrary, the U.S. foreign policy, including on North Korea's nuclear issues, was not relatively a major issue that hugely affects the decision of the voters.

For that reason, foreign policy, unpopular among voters, is highly unlikely to go through changes simply caused by a shift of congressional landscape. Every bill, by principle, requires an approval of both the Senate and the House. Therefore, it is hard for the foreign policy to be shaped in a direction favorable only to the Democrats even if a House majority Democrats oppose Trump's foreign policy. Above all, security and foreign policy has mostly and institutionally been decided by the Senate and the President. Moreover, there are not enough rationale and alternatives for the Democrats to oppose the current administration's negotiation-centered North Korea policy. The Democrats have thus far not raised a huge objection to the goal and methods of the Trump's North Korea policy. Nonetheless, the Democrats will be weary of a possibility of Trump reaching a hasty transitional agreement with North Korea.

I. Introduction

The U.S. midterm elections are generally considered a “report card” for evaluating the governing capacity of the incumbent president. Even with that fact, the 2018 U.S. midterm elections were essentially a referendum on President Trump as they were summed up as a tug-of-war between Trump supporters and the anti-Trump force. The election results came out as predicted with the Democrats taking over the House of Representatives and the Republicans winning a majority in the Senate. At this critical juncture, it is worth evaluating the implications of such shift of the U.S. congressional landscape on its foreign policy and strategy on North Korea’s denuclearization. To fully appreciate how the election results will affect the U.S. foreign policy down the road, especially its North Korea policy, it is necessary to first understand major issues at play in the U.S. elections.

II. The U.S. Midterm Elections and Its Foreign Policy

1. Major Diplomatic Issues in the Midterm Elections

In general, domestic issues are major issues at stake in the U.S. midterm elections. This 2018 midterm elections also had a wide range of controversial issues, such as health care, widening wealth disparity, illegal immigrants, and issues of a minority involving race. Such major issues at stake are related to fundamentally differing views on how the taxpayers’ money should be spent and what the welfare state should look like as illustrated in countless other U.S. elections. On the contrary, the U.S. foreign policy, including on North Korea’s nuclear issues, was not relatively a major issue that hugely affects the decision of the voters.

On the other hand, voters did pay attention to foreign policy regarding trade conflicts with China and immigration policy involving border issues. In fact, the Trump administration, since its inauguration, has faced mounting diplomatic challenges as follows: North Korea’s nuclear issues, renegotiation over trade agreements with Mexico and Canada, military burden-sharing with allies, including NATO,

reestablishment of the U.S.-U.K. relations caused by Brexit-triggered isolation of the U.K. and newly shaping relations among EU member states, prolonged Syrian war, and nuclear renegotiation with Iran in the Middle East. Among all the issues, what caught the public attention the most was issues of trade and tariff as trade conflicts with Beijing emerged to the surface during the elections. In addition, the Trump administration's Family Separation Policy and its immigration policy also received the public attention during the campaign as the caravan of Central American migrants has recently advanced to the U.S. to seek asylum.

2. Prospects on the Overall U.S. Foreign Policy

The political acts of the U.S. Congressmen generally show distinct patterns of accommodating the demands of voters who have the power to vote. For that reason, foreign policy, unpopular among voters, is highly unlikely to go through changes simply caused by a shift of congressional landscape. Every bill, by principle, requires an approval of both the Senate and the House. Therefore, it is hard for the foreign policy to be shaped in a direction favorable only to the Democrats even if a House majority Democrats oppose Trump's foreign policy. Above all, security and foreign policy has mostly and institutionally been decided by the Senate and the President. So the U.S. foreign policy is not highly likely to go through major dramatic changes in the future.

However, as the approval rating for the Trump's foreign policy has been hovering around as low as 40%, the House Democrats could try pressuring the Trump's movement on foreign policy by leveraging the public opinion favorable to them. For instance, the Democrats could raise a stronger voice for immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, who reside in the U.S., arguing for social integration and human rights. That will place a check on President Trump's anti-immigration discourse and related policy to some extent. However, the Democrats will also be stringent on the prevention of illegal immigration as the Obama administration did in the past.

In addition, the Democrats in the House are also expected to strive to address trade conflicts that the Trump administration is currently having with its trading partners. Yet, a change of stance on a trade discord with Beijing does not appear to be easy since the trade conflict with China is closely related to maintaining the U.S. global leadership, including security issues. In that sense, if the Democrats and the House Democrats take the stance in favor of China after the elections, it could create an appearance of the U.S. making a conciliatory gesture. In particular, if Beijing remains strong against Washington on trade issues, it becomes all the more difficult for the U.S.—already tough enough in its stance—to yield, regardless of the political leaning of the majority in Congress. Above all, the U.S. Congress is institutionally limited in its authority to decide the trade policy. To that end, the current direction of the Trump administration’s foreign and trade policy is highly likely to be continued down the road.

3. Prospects for North Korea Policy

The results of the U.S. midterm elections are analyzed to have a limited impact on the Trump administration’s North Korea policy. Three implications could be derived in terms of relations between the election results and changes of policy. First, the Republicans winning a majority in the Senate are not going to have a big impact on the Trump administration’s North Korea policy. In fact, Trump’s political standing will remain unwavering for the next two years as the Republicans get to hold a majority in the Senate. To that end, the Trump administration will not necessarily utilize its North Korea policy as a means of domestic politics to reinforce its political standing and turn the public attention away from rapidly-unfolding possible crisis. Second, although the Republicans losing a majority in the House will make the Trump administration somewhat uncomfortable, its North Korea policy is unlikely to be changed. The House of Representatives, of course, are expected to take the lead in various congressional committees. Especially, committees on foreign affairs, military, and information will step up efforts for a review and check on the Trump’s North Korea policy. However, there are not enough rationale and

alternatives for the Democrats to oppose the current administration's negotiation-centered North Korea policy. The Democrats have thus far not raised a huge objection to the goal and methods of the Trump's North Korea policy. Nonetheless, the Democrats will be weary of a possibility of Trump reaching a hasty transitional agreement with North Korea due to his ignorance on international politics—an agreement intended to boast about his achievements.

Moreover, it is possible for the Democrats to demand that North Korean human rights issues either be included in or linked to an agenda of negotiations over North Korea's nuclear program. The Trump administration could possibly take in the Democrats' requests given that they have repeatedly called on the administration for having an uncompromising stance on North Korea human rights issues. However, the Democrats will also carry a risk of taking the blame: when human rights issues get in the way of denuclearization talks, the discussion on denuclearization itself reaches a stalemate or even regresses. Because of that risk, the Democrats will not bluntly raise North Korea's human rights issues in the face of nuclear negotiations with the North.

Third, there could be indirect reverberations caused by the midterm election results. The Democrats will begin actively raising a barrage of inquiries on Trump's overall foreign policy, which have upended their achievements. In that case, mainly three factors are expected to affect issues surrounding the Korean Peninsula. Cases in point are a trade war between Washington and Beijing, the U.S. withdrawal from Iranian nuclear deal, and indiscriminate buck-passing to the U.S. allies. For the time being, the U.S.-China relations will not cause a big change in the U.S. policy on North Korea. In fact, it is highly unlikely that the Democrats would neither raise an objection nor start an engagement in the Trump's policy on China. It is because the Democrats have so far not endorsed or cared for China's situation. Besides, imposing tariff on Chinese goods—major issues at stake—is in the hands of the administration granted as its exclusive rights. Even if President Trump accedes to the Democrats' demands of changes of his China policy, such changes are not likely to lead to a shift of policy of second order sanction against North Korea—a policy of imposing sanctions on the North through China. In general, China has

accommodated the demands of the U.S. by separating the U.S.–China relations from the China–North Korea relations.

In fact, the U.S. withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal will have a relatively bigger impact on North Korea’s perception and strategy as opposed to having a direct impact on the Trump administration’s North Korea policy. Pyeongyang could raise a high suspicion on the irreversibility of agreements made with the U.S.—a risk that could in turn be reflected in its negotiation process with the U.S. Furthermore, conflicts within the Congress and the Democrats’ concerns on the Trump administration’s policy toward its allies could come to the surface. However, the Democrats are unlikely to make foreign policy issues a priority: when the engagement policy with allies continues to be in place with a focus on the economic aspect, not on major security issues, such as the presence of the US Forces Korea; and when the public attention is increasingly on economic issues.

III. Conclusion

A shift in congressional landscape after the U.S. midterm elections is unlikely to bring about a big change in its policy on North Korea and strategy on North Korea’s nuclear issue. In fact, the U.S. is expected to continue negotiations with North Korea under the current sanctions regime. However, the way that Trump has governed the country hints that a change of attention of the president himself could become an “unexpected factor” shaping the foreign policy. For that reason, resolving North Korea’s nuclear issue could be put in the back burner among Trump’s priority lists. By contrast, North Korea’s nuclear issue could be in the global spotlight more so than anyone could expect so that the U.S.–North Korea negotiation could take place to the level unimaginable before. However, a negotiation between the U.S. and North Korea is highly likely to proceed at a similarly slow pace as recently amidst the House Democrats’ check.

Even though the nuclear agreement was reached, the implementation process would take a long time as demonstrated in the nuclear negotiation process with the former Soviet Union and Iran. Moreover, it is common that the deal itself

gets abolished triggered by newly arising conflicts in the process. To that end, a successful denuclearization process should accompany the trust-building process between relevant countries. In particular, a key to addressing North Korea's nuclear issue lies in how far the U.S. and North Korea could work together in building mutual trust. With that in mind, the South Korean government should put forth not only efforts for improving inter-Korean relations but also various diplomatic efforts for the two main parties—the U.S. and North Korea—to build trust. Therefore, diplomatic measures should primarily be prepared to help North Korea alleviate a sense of anxiety and consolidate trust toward South Korea and the U.S. In that sense, it is important to demonstrate the efforts of the ROK government in facilitating inter-Korean exchange and easing sanctions that are corresponding to North Korea's denuclearization steps. Moreover, it is critically important to more actively implement both the Pyeongyang Declaration and the Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjeom Declaration in the Military Domain in earning trust of North Korea and creating an environment conducive to settling peace on the Korean Peninsula. Such endeavor should be followed regardless of the U.S. midterm election results. ©KINU 2018

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