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Success or Failure?

The Obama Administration's Policy to North Korea

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Interviewee

L. Gordon Flake

With its “strategic patience” approach, the Obama administration has had some successes with its policy toward North Korea. But there has also been some criticism about whether it has done enough to manage the nuclear threat. The EAI invited L. Gordon Flake, Executive Director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation, to evaluate the Obama administration's policy toward North Korea and prospects for the Six-Party Talks as well as the upcoming U.S. presidential election. The following is a summary of the main policy recommendations from this interview.

Q1: As we come up to the end of President Obama's first term in office, how would you evaluate the administration's approach to North Korea?

A1: "I think you could argue that rather than having a North Korea policy, the Obama administration has really had a Northeast Asia policy, and it has been a rather successful one."

- The Obama administration's policy toward North Korea is the product of the past twenty years of the ongoing nuclear crisis. When President Barack Obama entered office, he stated that he was willing to use diplomacy with North Korea. However, the events of early 2009 with the missile and nuclear tests had a major impact on the policy choices of the administration. These events really set the tone for the Obama administration's policy and “strategic patience” emerged out of this.
- “Strategic patience” was a reaction to the two extreme phases of the Bush administration's policy to North Korea. The first phase came with then Vice-President Dick Cheney's approach of “you don't negotiate with evil, you defeat it” and efforts to undermine any dialogue with Pyongyang. The second phase was characterized by Christopher Hill's efforts where the priorities were wrong, i.e. negotiating with North Korea in secret first and then discussing with the allies last. In reacting to these two excesses, the Obama administration underlined the importance of dialogue while it also set the right priorities, particularly in working with allies first. There has been some success in this regard as Washington's relations with its allies in the region are now very strong.
- Despite these approaches, it would be wrong to say that the Obama administration has a North Korea policy. Relations with North Korea are not in U.S. national interests, rather Washington's priorities are in preserving peace and stability in East Asia, strengthening relations with its allies, and maintaining positive ties with China and Russia. The Obama administration has been very careful to make sure that the problem of North Korea does not

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threaten or overshadow U.S. strategic, economic, and security interests in the region. It would be more accurate to describe its approach as part of a broader Northeast Asia policy.

- “Strategic patience” is not a policy but rather a descriptive element of where the United States is at. It is a recognition that the United States is unable to move until North Korea shows what President Obama describes as “seriousness of purpose.”

Q2: How would you address some of the criticism toward “strategic patience” that it is not proactive enough in dealing with the threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear program?

A2: “‘Strategic patience’ is not a strategy, it is just a description of the reality. And the reality is that in the current political environment and all the other countries combined, there is not an option of us being more proactive.”

- With the current political environment, it is not possible for the United States to be more proactive and “strategic patience” is a reflection of this fact. There is still no evidence yet that North Korea is willing to move forward or change. If Kim Jong-un were to show that he is a reformer then there might be an opportunity to be more proactive on the issues. But this is not the case. Kim Jong-un appears to be still in a vulnerable position and in fact, he has gone the opposite direction as North Korea has recently enshrined its nuclear status in its constitution.
- What is more likely is that North Korea will continue on the same course of threats and provocations. However, it will always remain as a second or third priority within U.S. policy making circles. That would change though if North Korea were to carry out an unambiguously successful nuclear or missile test. For example, a successful uranium nuclear test would certainly be regarded by the United States as a game-changer.
- It would also be difficult to make any signal toward North Korea in order to induce it to change as there are no more carrots left on the table. For example, U.S. Congress made an amendment to the Farm Bill which outlaws the provision of food aid to North Korea. This limits the kind of inducements that a negotiator could offer to North Korea. The only way to move out of this situation is for Pyongyang to change the environment and make moves that would be seen as a “seriousness of purpose.”

Q3: With the U.S. presidential election coming up in November 2012, what is the current thinking among the two political camps on policy to North Korea?

A3: “The questions of Korea and Korea policy and even North Korea policy have not been particularly partisan issues. I anticipate that the 2012 campaign, at least in regards to Asia, will again be a relatively mature, non-controversial campaign.”

- There are no significant differences between the two political camps in the run-up to the 2012 U.S. presidential election. This was the case in the 2008 election between Obama and McCain. Obama has not politicized Asia policy like Clinton and Bush did during the presidential campaigns in 1993 and 2000 respectively. For the 2012 campaign, domestic and economic issues will be more of a focus. This is also in part because Asia policy has been a strong point for the Obama administration.

Q4: What are the prospects for the future of the Six-Party Talks with leadership changes taking place in most of the countries involved in this process?

A4: “What was anticipated to be a year of tremendous change in 2012 in terms of politics turns out to be one that doesn’t have a lot of change in the status quo, at least with the impact on the Six-Party Talks.”

- There are unlikely to be any major changes in the Six-Party Talks process as the result of leadership changes taking place in 2012. The change of president in South Korea may offer some chance for change, with the next administration likely to reach out to North Korea. However, there are many limits to engagement whether it is under the conservatives or the progressives in South Korea. The sinking of the *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island of 2010 have placed a limit on such engagement and make the unconditional provision of aid and support unlikely. There are also deeper questions about whether North Korea will respond to any overtures from South Korea as well as the more fundamental challenge that Pyongyang has never been prepared to discuss serious security issues with Seoul. China has not been focused on the Six-Party Talks due to its own leadership succession issues. There are rumors that the next leadership in China views it as a legacy of Hu Jintao’s government and may seek other approaches. Japan and Russia are unlikely to have any impact with their leadership changes.

About the Interviewee

L. Gordon Flake

L. Gordon Flake joined the Mansfield Foundation in February 1999. He was previously a Senior Fellow and Associate Director of the Program on Conflict Resolution at The Atlantic Council of the United States and prior to that Director for Research and Academic Affairs at the Korea Economic Institute of America. He has authored numerous book chapters on policy issues in Asia and is a regular contributor to the U.S. and Asian press. Mr. Flake has traveled to North Korea numerous times. He is a member of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies and serves on the Board of the United States Committee of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (USCSCAP) as well as on the Board of the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea and the Advisory Council of the Korea Economic Institute of America.