

Obama, McCain Differ on Korea Policy

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Conservative President Lee Myung-bak must be prepared to play different chess games with either liberal Barack Obama or conservative John McCain as the two nominees have very contrasting visions regarding their policies on Korea.

Their respective policy approaches as presidential nominees will likely change and evolve over time, but a comparison of the two suggests the course of South Korea-U.S. relations could take vastly different turns depending on who becomes the next occupant of the White House.

In recent decades, Korea and the United States have had presidents whose political orientations were contrasting, often causing tension in the alliance. Liberal President Roh Moo-hyun was frequently at odds with conservative President George W. Bush.

Kim Dae-jung enjoyed a "relative honeymoon" with the liberal Clinton administration although his North Korea policy was later partly undone by Bush's hawkish stance, describing North Korea as part of an axis of evil.

In the 1970s, authoritarian Park Chung-hee was haunted by Jimmy Carter who took issue with Seoul's human rights record and threatened to withdraw American troops from Korea.

His successor Chun Doo-hwan was backed by conservative Ronald Reagan who put the alliance and anti-communism above the dictatorship. The conservative Bush senior and Chun's successor Roh Tae-woo managed to maintain a status quo in the alliance as they were both conservative.

Senator Obama of Illinois claimed the nomination for the liberal Democratic Party, Wednesday, clearing the way for a presidential election contest between him and conservative Republican Party candidate Senator McCain of Arizona, on November 4.

Here are the positions of White House hopeful Obama and his rival McCain on the main Korean issues:

South Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement

Obama has said the current Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) should not be ratified and has suggested that the deal be renegotiated. He has said the accord does not do enough to address concerns of American autoworkers. Organized labor unions, including the autoworkers' unions, are some of the biggest supporters of the Democratic

Party.

In an open letter to U.S. President George W. Bush last month, Obama said there would be "a major fight over a free trade agreement with South Korea" if President Bush sends the trade agreement to the U.S. Congress.

"Senator Obama does not support the South Korea free trade agreement in its current form," according to his campaign platform. "He is also troubled that the Bush Administration has not done more to help American workers who are losing their jobs as a result of the changing world economy."

McCain, on the other hand, supports the passage of the KORUS FTA. "We have negotiated a trade agreement with South Korea that will expand American exports and create American jobs," he said on his official campaign Web site.

McCain said the Democratic nominee has been opposing this agreement, thus placing the Democratic Party's "short-term political interests ahead of the long-term national interest. Retreating behind protectionist walls will neither create American jobs nor further our international credibility."

North Korean Conundrum

Obama said he would seek a new framework for partnerships in Asia that move beyond ad hoc meetings such as the current six-party talks. "Obama will forge a more effective framework in Asia that goes beyond bilateral agreements, occasional summits, and ad hoc arrangements, such as the six-party talks on North Korea," according to his Web site.

"Obama will maintain strong ties with allies like Japan, South Korea and Australia; work to build an infrastructure with countries in East Asia that can promote stability and prosperity; and work to ensure that China plays by international rules."

He also said he would crack down on nuclear proliferation by strengthening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty so that countries like North Korea that break the rules will "automatically face strong international sanctions."

Obama has said during his campaign speeches that he may be willing to sit down face-to-face with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il if that's what it takes to resolve the continuing nuclear tension on the Korean peninsula.

McCain, who has a hawkish stance on foreign and national security issues, differentiates his North Korean policy from Obama. He said he would "build a united front with democratic allies like South Korea instead of rushing to placate Kim Jong-il with a presidential visit."

McCain pledged a tough stance against Pyongyang's nuclear activities. He has even chastised fellow Republicans and President Bush for what some observers claimed was a

softening stance toward North Korea.

McCain said on his Web site: ``We will not convince Kim Jong-il to abandon his nuclear weapons — let alone end his horrific treatment of his people — by promising that the president of the United States will unconditionally sit down with him to ask what else he wants."

McCain said, ``We know what Kim Jong-il wants: a diminished American presence in Asia; payments for one part of his nuclear program and no accountability for others and a free hand for his regime to torture underground Christians, execute dissidents and starve the disloyal."

Alliance

Obama has acknowledged the critical role the South Korea-U.S. alliance has played during the Cold War and beyond. But he said the alliance has been tested in recent years. ``The alliance has been a remarkably strong and successful one. Forged in blood during the Korean War more than a half-century ago, the alliance has sustained itself through the crucible of the Cold War and remains central to U.S. security policy in East Asia," he has said, according to the U.S. Congressional Web site.

``Nonetheless, I do not think it is an overstatement to say that the U.S.-Korea relationship has been adrift in recent years."

McCain has emphasized the alliance as a crucial element for U.S. diplomacy in the Asian region and beyond.

``Korea stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the United States, defending freedom not only in East Asia, but also across the entire globe, deploying the third-largest contingent to Iraq, serving with distinction in rebuilding Afghanistan, and leading critical peacekeeping operations," according to McCain's Web site. ``Americans owe a debt of gratitude to our Korean allies, and the Korean people understand the bond we share."

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