

# THE DONG-A ILBO

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## Leadership changes in neighbors to minimally affect 2 Koreas

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The impact of leadership change (including re-election) in South Korea's major neighboring countries -- the U.S., China, Russia and Japan -- will have little impact on the political landscape of the Korean Peninsula, a group of experts said at a recent seminar.

All who attended the conference said in unison that the neighboring countries are facing a change of power but this will have little impact on their North Korea policies.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, said, "There is a little difference in North Korea policy between President Barack Obama and Republican candidate Mitt Romney. They're not fundamentally different," adding, "If re-elected, President Obama will continue dragging North Korea out to the negotiating table. However, as Pyongyang shows no sign of change, the North Korea issue is unlikely to take priority."

Romney has not talked of North Korea policy in detail, but if elected, he is expected to increase sanctions on the North and pressure China to isolate it. He could also assist Seoul in taking a confrontational approach to Pyongyang.

Bandow said, "In the short term, the situation on the Korean Peninsula is unpredictable and it could face a risky situation. But given Romney's policy approach, he will be like former President George W. Bush, who sought a dialogue with Pyongyang in the end."

In other words, unless the confrontation policy leads to a positive result, Romney is unlikely to change North Korea policy.

Forbes magazine columnist Gordon Chang said, "China can hardly pay attention to North Korea because of its own internal political issues," adding, "The Chinese political leadership's attention to North Korea is in paralysis now. China is the only country that has leverage against North Korea but has no room to exercise it."

"China has a delay in power transfer from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping in the party congress in October due to falling growth rate, increasing demand for democracy, and a series of political scandals. The complicated internal issues are distracting policymakers from important issues such as North Korea issues."

Andrew Scobell, a senior political scientist at the U.S. think tank RAND Corp., said, "It's true that the Chinese military and the Chinese Communist Party have a bigger conflict and the country has become more unstable politically, but this should not be exaggerated."

"The Chinese leadership has always managed such conflicts and institutionalized them. It is better to describe Beijing's approach to North Korea as inertia (rather than paralysis). However, Beijing has the greatest interest in stability in the border region with North Korea. If it is threatened, it will step in."

Yim Yong-soon, professor emeritus of political science at SungKyunKwan University in Seoul, said, "China has always influenced North Korea behind the scenes. Pyongyang doesn't conduct nuclear tests because Beijing put pressure on it," adding, "How the start of the negotiation between Seoul and Beijing for a free trade agreement will impact China's relationship with North Korea is drawing much attention."

Robert Sutter, political science professor at The George Washington University in Washington, said, "Korea's neighboring countries, which are facing a change of power, will not risk themselves to drastically change their policies to take care of their own issues," adding, "Nonetheless, since they are the participants to the six-party talks and have interests on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea should try to better relations with them."