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Southeast Asia Trip to Test Bush's Stature

Election Results May Hinder International Trade and North Korea Talks, Analysts Say

By Michael A. Fletcher

President Bush leaves tonight for a week-long visit to Southeast Asia that may offer an early indication of how the political "thumping" he took a week ago will affect his standing on the world stage.

Bush leaves Washington for a series of summits and an economic conference in Vietnam one week after elections in which Democrats won control of both houses of Congress, in what was widely interpreted as an expression of voter unhappiness over the Iraq war.

But just as Iraq poses a long-term challenge for the U.S. policymakers, so, too, do the forces shaping Southeast Asia, a region of booming economies that has its own festering pockets of terrorism. The area also is important to solving another major item on the U.S. foreign policy agenda: the long-standing problem of North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

Bush's visit to Singapore, Vietnam and Indonesia is intended to focus heavily on trade issues, global health concerns such as AIDS and avian flu, as well as the North Korea question. But just as important may be how Bush is perceived by the other leaders at the meeting in the aftermath of his recent political setback.

Our "Asian friends will be watching initially President Bush and his team in terms of his body language, his statements to see whether he will be weakened or committed to going forward with a broad and purposeful agenda in Asia as a whole," said Kurt Campbell, a senior vice president at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

One thing Asian leaders will be watching for is whether Bush can still deliver on trade-liberalization legislation, given his weakened political state and the populist opposition to many free-trade agreements, according to some analysts.

The Bush administration is pressing Congress to pass a bill granting Vietnam permanent normal trade relations before the president arrives in Hanoi on Friday, a step that is needed for U.S. firms to take advantage of the low tariffs that nation will enact as a newly minted member of the World Trade Organization.

Vietnam, which boasts the fastest-growing economy in Asia, is also one of the world's fastest-growing markets for U.S. goods.

But the House failed to pass the legislation last night. The vote of 228 to 161 in favor of the bill fell short of the two-thirds majority required by a procedure that limited debate.

Republicans planned to bring up the measure again tomorrow under normal procedures, requiring only a majority for passage, House aides said. The Senate is expected to take up the issue later in the week.

Passing the legislation ahead of the meeting "would be useful for President Bush," said Grant Aldonas, a former undersecretary of commerce for international trade in the Bush administration. "It would be useful, certainly, for the United States to ensure that our trading partners in Asia know that we're prepared to be at the table -- both Congress and the president -- and contributing to an aggressive trade policy."

Yesterday, the United States removed Vietnam from its list of nations that do not allow religious freedom, citing what it called Vietnam's greater tolerance for religious expression.

While trade will take center stage during his trip, Bush also is expected to use the opportunity to meet with partners in an effort to continue pressing North Korea to give up -- or at least limit -- its nuclear weapons program. North Korea agreed to return to six-party nuclear-disarmament talks late last month, just weeks after it conducted its first test of a nuclear device. As a result of that test, the United Nations swiftly imposed sanctions on goods flowing in and out of North Korea.

"It's . . . not always helpful, to answer the question, you know, can we live with or not live with a nuclear North Korea?" said Michael Green, former senior director for Asia at the National Security Council under Bush. "What does that mean? Does it mean we're going to attack North Korea because of the nuclear weapons program? I think the answer is no. Does it mean we go on with business as usual? Of course not."

While the U.N. sanctions have clearly exacted a toll on North Korea, Bush is expected to use the visit and a meeting with South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun to pressure him to do more to enforce the U.N. sanctions. Yesterday, South Korea said it will not take part in a U.S.-led plan to intercept shipments of weapons of mass destruction that may have involved the South Korean military stopping North Korean ships.

"The Republic of Korea is doing virtually nothing to impose a cost on the north," Green said. "That will be a difficult discussion."

The first stop on the president's trip will be Singapore, the booming city-state where on Thursday he is scheduled to give the major speech of his trip on the cooperation between the United States and Asia to combat poverty, disease and terrorism. On Friday, he will become the second U.S. president to visit Vietnam since the fall of Saigon when he travels to Hanoi.

In Vietnam, Bush will take part in a series of meetings with other world leaders and visit a program working to learn the fate of soldiers still missing in action from the Vietnam War. He also will take part in meetings of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, an organization that includes 21 nations that together account for half the world's trade and 57 percent of the global economic output.

Later, the president will travel to Ho Chi Minh City. There the president will tour a medical institute that focuses on AIDS and avian flu research, before taking part in events showcasing Vietnam's fast-growing economy.

On Monday, he will travel to Indonesia, the world's largest majority-Muslim nation, where he is scheduled to visit an educational program and hold a news conference with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, before going to Hawaii. Next Tuesday, he will have breakfast with U.S. troops in Honolulu before returning to Washington.