



**(Unsolicited) Advice to Senator Kerry** by Ralph A. Cossa

Is John Kerry Kim Jong-il's best friend? Is North Korea more likely to get a favorable deal from the Democrats? Would a Kerry administration abandon the current multilateral approach and enter into the bilateral negotiations long demanded by Pyongyang (effectively cutting Seoul and Tokyo out of the diplomatic process)? And, more broadly, will the current close ties between Washington and Tokyo be somehow put at risk if the Democrats win in November?

While Senator Kerry has yet to be officially ordained as the Democratic challenger – this does not occur until the Democratic National Convention in Boston in July – the “what does a Kerry victory mean for us” debate is already raging in Japan (as elsewhere). As a non-partisan observer of U.S. policy in Asia, I would argue that the answer to all of the above questions is “No!” It is important, however, that the Kerry camp keep these questions in mind as it crafts its Asia policy and begins (or intensifies) the debate on Asia policy in general and Korea policy in particular.

It is in Senator Kerry's domestic political interest – and in America's national security interest – that North Korea's “Dear Leader” be promptly and convincingly disabused of the notion that waiting until November in hopes of a Kerry victory will somehow get him a better deal from Washington.

No one wins votes in the U.S. by being soft on North Korea. Pyongyang needs to understand that it is inconceivable that any U.S. Congress, regardless of composition or orientation, would ever agree to normalize relations with North Korea as long as it hangs on to its nuclear aspirations. Even if Senator Kerry (or President Bush) wanted to cut a one-sided deal with Pyongyang – and there is no reason to believe that either would want to – the Congress would never endorse or, more importantly, fund such an agreement until the nuclear issue is successfully resolved.

Senator Kerry needs to make it clear, early on, that whatever his differences regarding President Bush's North Korea policy, he is in complete agreement with the ultimate U.S. objective – the complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons programs (CVID, for short) – and with the multilateral approach that makes South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia an integral part of the solution.

If the Kerry campaign wants to criticize the Bush administration for being too slow or too preoccupied to deal with the problem, or for sending mixed signals due to ongoing ideological debates within the administration between engagers and neo-cons, or for not always taking South Korean or other regional sensitivities into account, I would merely say

“welcome to the club.” But in trying to differentiate himself, Kerry needs to be careful not to send Pyongyang the wrong message or to undermine the painstaking diplomacy that has resulted in a (fragile) consensus among the dialogue partners as to the CVID objective.

Senator Kerry also needs to endorse the current Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) process involving Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo. This should not be hard to do politically, since the TCOG was actually created by the Clinton administration. Despite Bush's overall ABC (anything but Clinton) approach, the TCOG has survived and has played a vital role in keeping Washington's two critical Northeast Asian allies singing the same tune (albeit not always in perfect harmony) when it comes to North Korea policy.

I must confess that, as old as I am, I cannot recall a time when politics actually did “stop at the water's edge.” It clearly is not going to happen this year, and shouldn't; even during wartime, a president must be held accountable for his foreign policies, especially when they result in lives being put at risk, at home and abroad. But the challenger must avoid digging himself into holes that would be difficult to get out of once the reality of governing replaces the rhetoric of campaigning.

It took President Clinton several years to get over his “butchers of Beijing” comments or for President Bush to square his China as “strategic competitor” outlook with the reality of having to deal constructively with our new Chinese “partner in diplomacy.” Today Washington enjoys the best relations it has had in years with both China and Japan; bipartisan support for this accomplishment would make dealing with North Korea and other challenges much easier for Mr. Kerry if “regime change” comes to Washington. Senator Kerry argues convincingly that Washington needs to restore its damaged relations with friends and allies around the world. He also needs to ensure that those few relationships currently on the right track remain there.

There is considerably anxiety in Japan that a Kerry administration might want somehow to “punish” Tokyo for being too close or too supportive of Washington. But the decision by Tokyo to commit both military personnel and considerable financial resources to help stabilize Iraq is consistent with Mr. Kerry's call to internationalize the Iraq reconstruction effort, and the current six-party approach toward dealing with the Korean Peninsula nuclear crisis likewise is in sync with his call for greater multilateral cooperation in dealing with international challenges.

It would be wise, and statesmanlike, for presidential aspirant Kerry to make the effort today to make our Asian friends and allies a bit more comfortable with the prospects of

his possible election, while making North Korea a bit less comfortable, lest he be pictured as Kim Jong-il's best friend in America and an impediment to the current diplomatic process.

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