



Six-Party Talks: Challenging the Conventional Wisdom by Ralph A. Cossa

“The odds of any progress regarding the North Korean nuclear issue appear slim to nonexistent between now and the U.S. November presidential elections.” This is the conventional wisdom, as publicly proclaimed by ROK officials. I have also heard this view echoed in Washington and Beijing in recent weeks. North Korea is hoping for “regime change” in Washington, the reasoning goes, and the Bush administration is too divided and too preoccupied with Iraq for there to be any significant progress before November.

This may well be true. But history and logic (to the extent that logic is ever a factor on Korean-related issues) argue otherwise. There are good reasons why both Washington and especially Pyongyang may be willing to cut a deal – or at least establish the framework for one – prior to November. The U.S. reason is simple: a settlement that achieves the minimum U.S. objective – a verifiable end to North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs – defuses a potential major campaign issue (Clinton ended the North’s nuclear programs; Bush allowed them to start up again). But, Pyongyang can also best achieve its ultimate objective – regime survival – by moving forward before November.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-il is a master of brinkmanship politics. But he is not suicidal. Eighteen months ago, when U.S. forces were rapidly marching on Baghdad, Kim reportedly went into hiding, afraid that he would be next. After the U.S. became bogged down in Iraq, the North felt a sense of relief; Pyongyang has been given a free pass to misbehave and stonewall and continue its game of playing all sides against one another.

But the pass is not open-ended, and what may be brinkmanship in October could become Russian roulette in November if President Bush wins a second term and regime change advocates in Washington gain the upper hand. While the North may think (falsely, in my view) that it would get a better deal from a Kerry administration than from a Bush administration, it should also realize that it stands a better chance of getting Washington to take “yes” for an answer in October – when even the worst of the neocons would feel compelled to accept any halfway reasonable offer from Pyongyang – than after a successful reelection campaign. This is especially true if, as suspected, the current State Department “internationalists” do not continue into a second term.

If, in late September, Senator Kerry is ahead by 20 points, there is virtually no chance that Pyongyang would negotiate before the November elections. But, what are the odds of this? More likely, the race will at best be too close to call or with a narrow margin of separation. Would North Korea be willing to

bet its regime survival on a more unconstrained second Bush administration? I think not.

It is, of course, always dangerous to try to predict North Korean behavior or motives. But, we saw a similar tactic in September/October 1994, when Pyongyang negotiated the Agreed Framework immediately prior to U.S. mid-term elections. While I happen to believe the Clinton administration got the best deal possible at that time and that the Agreed Framework bought us a lot of time and created a growing sense of dependency by Pyongyang on outside assistance – leverage that is not being fully applied – the North Koreans can be excused for thinking that election year politics gained them a better deal, since this has been a steady Republican mantra for the past ten years. Similarly, the North waited until just before the 2000 elections to try to entice then-President Clinton to come to Pyongyang; a tactic that almost succeeded, had it not been for higher priority Middle East developments.

If history is an accurate guide and survival logic continues to prevail, look to Pyongyang to suddenly become more responsive and to put forth at least a marginally acceptable counterproposal in late September or early October. To be credible, Pyongyang must acknowledge that its suspected uranium enrichment program does in fact exist. Washington cannot accept anything less. But, despite its past denials, it is not impossible for Pyongyang to make a 180 degree turn and acknowledge that they did have a “peaceful” uranium program or that a rogue element in the North – Pyongyang’s version of Pakistan’s A.Q. Khan – had been acting improperly unbeknownst to the government. Ironically, Seoul’s recent admission that it had rogue scientists conducting uranium enrichment experiments four years ago, rather than undermining the prospects for a settlement – another piece of “conventional wisdom” – may actually provide a model for a similar “confession” by the North.

Unless Bush’s poll numbers start to dramatically decline, don’t be too surprised to see Pyongyang becoming more receptive to Washington’s earlier phased approach proposal that allowed rewards from others (but not from Washington) in return for a verifiable freeze as a first step toward nuclear disarmament. The pressure will then be on the Bush administration to deal constructively with Pyongyang or to explain to a war-weary American electorate why it won’t take “yes” for an answer.

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