



Bush-Kerry Debate: Getting Korea Wrong!

by Ralph A. Cossa

Regardless of whether you're a Republican or a Democrat, if you are concerned about events on the Korean Peninsula, you had to come away from the first presidential debate feeling quite distressed. Neither President Bush nor Sen. Kerry had his facts straight and, collectively, they managed to significantly reduce the already slim chance that there would be any near-term progress in the currently stalled six-party talks process.

In response to the question as to whether he supported bilateral or six-party talks with Pyongyang, Kerry rightfully stated "both," but you had to go over the transcripts several times to hear it, since he said it before moderator Jim Lehrer had finished his question. Sen. Kerry then proceeded to talk exclusively about the need for direct dialogue with North Korea, without once mentioning that – as clearly stated in his official pronouncements – this bilateral dialogue should occur within the context of the six-party talks, not as a separate initiative.

What's worse, the best that he could say in response to the president's repeated assertion that bilateral talks would drive the Chinese away from the table was that "Just because the president says it can't be done, that you'd lose China, doesn't mean it can't be done . . . we can get those weapons at the same time as we get China because China has an interest in the outcome too." Neither one seemed to know that Beijing – like Seoul, Moscow, and even Tokyo – have long encouraged Washington to deal directly with Pyongyang and that, at the last round of talks (in late June), such a side discussion actually occurred between the U.S. and North Korea, much to China's (and everyone else's) delight.

By repeatedly pledging that his administration would not discuss the problem one-on-one with the North because "it's precisely what Kim Jong-il wants," the president has once again undercut the credibility of his own negotiators while seemingly putting his personal disdain for North Korea's leader ahead of the pursuit of America's national security interests. To paraphrase Kerry, just because Kim Jong-il wants us to do it doesn't mean it's the wrong thing to do. The key question, avoided by the president and barely touched upon by Kerry, is "would direct dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang, within the context of the six-party talks, enhance or detract from the accomplishment of our objective (the complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons program – which neither candidate chose to mention)?"

Before the debate, it seemed that the Bush administration's answer to this question was a cautious "yes." Has the president "flip-flopped"? If there were any South Koreans left who were still prepared to give the Bush

administration the benefit of the doubt when it proclaims that it is willing to solve the problem diplomatically and is not intent on regime change, they must be shaking their heads wondering "where do we go from here?" The ROK government is also wondering why President Bush (once again) neglected to mention South Korea's contribution to the war in Iraq – the third largest foreign troop presence after the U.S. and UK (unless you count the thousands of al-Qaeda "troops" that have flocked to Iraq since the U.S. invasion).

President Bush was quick to "correct" Sen. Kerry that the problem with North Korea today is uranium enrichment, not plutonium. The real problem, of course, is both. Yes, it was the discovery of North Korea's clandestine uranium enrichment program that prompted the current crisis in October of 2002. However, while the Bush administration has been busy fighting with itself over how best to proceed with this crisis – with hardliners consistently attempting to undermine various diplomatic approaches – the North Koreans have thrown out inspectors, reprocessed 8,000 spent fuel rods, and now claim to have "weaponized" the extracted plutonium; actions that Sen. Kerry alluded to once in passing but did not seem prepared to focus on, despite his stated belief that nuclear proliferation was the greatest threat facing the United States today. This was one of the few points on which the two candidates agreed (although President Bush rightfully added that it was not proliferation per se but the fear that such weapons would fall into the hands of terrorists that constituted the real danger).

If the situation on the Korean Peninsula is a serious one – and both candidates seem to agree that it is – and if nuclear proliferation is the greatest threat that America faces in the future – another common point of agreement – then you would think that President Bush and Sen. Kerry could at least get their facts straight and understand their own stated positions before entering into an internationally televised debate. They clearly had their positions on Iraq memorized, and found opportunities to repeat them continuously, regardless of the question being asked.

Perhaps before their next debate they can get themselves prepared to discuss events outside Iraq that also constitute a threat to America's national security interests.

Ralph A. Cossa is president of the Pacific Forum CSIS. He can be reached at pacforum@hawaii.rr.com