



(Unsolicited) Advice on Asia Policy for President-elect Obama by Ralph A. Cossa

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Foreign policy bloggers and pundits are already gushing forth with advice for President-elect Obama. Allow me to add some of my own, at least as far as Asia policy is concerned.

The first bit of more general advice is to remember that the United States only has one president at a time and, like it or not, that president is George W. Bush until Jan 20, 2009. I start with this reminder since many experts are already talking about things that President-elect Obama should be doing now to hit the ground running. But the most important thing he can do between now and January 20 is to do nothing that undermines the incumbent president's ability to conduct foreign policy.

One case in point is the suggestion by several no doubt well-intentioned security specialists that Obama immediately send a high-level emissary to North Korea to lay out his views on moving forward with Korean Peninsula denuclearization. Some have nominated former Defense Secretary William Perry for that task; others suggest a bipartisan team including Perry and either Henry Kissinger or Colin Powell, both former secretaries of state. IF sending an emissary was a good idea, any combination of the above three individuals would constitute a dream team. But, sending such an emissary *now* would be an extremely bad idea, as it would undercut the very important and sensitive efforts currently underway to get Pyongyang to agree in writing to the nuclear verification protocol that it has reportedly agreed upon in principle. It would instead give Pyongyang an excuse to do nothing for the next several months or longer, since it will no doubt take several months beyond inauguration day before Obama's Asia team is fully in place and ready for negotiations.

Given this reality, sending a bipartisan delegation to Pyongyang shortly *after* his inauguration (as others have suggested) is probably a very good idea. But for now, what the president-elect really needs to do is voice his strong support for the current negotiating process while calling on North Korea both to spell out and sign the verification protocol and to outline and agree upon the next phase in the denuclearization process with the current negotiating team. Rightly or wrongly, Pyongyang feels "betrayed" by the perceived failure of South Korean President Lee Myung Bak to live up to the (in my view overly generous and unrealistic) promises of his predecessor once he took office this past February. As a result, it will likely need some signal of Obama's commitment to the current negotiating process before it proceeds with talks.

The Koreans Obama most needs to talk to before his inauguration reside in the South, not the North. U.S.-South Korea policy vis-a-vis the North has been out of synch for much of the past decade. We went from the U.S. being too hard and ROK being too soft on the North to Washington now seeming more flexible than Seoul. The two allies need to get back on the same page in order to effectively deal with Pyongyang. Some common ground between the extremes of rejection and renegotiation also need to be found to rescue the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. Its passage would benefit both economies in troubled times; its failure will put significant strains on the overall ROK-U.S. relationship – Koreans are already agonizing this morning over the prospects of the U.S. renegeing on the deal.

President-elect Obama also needs to send some early signals of reassurance to Japan. For reasons not entirely clear or logical, there is a widespread perception in Japan that Republicans like Japan more than Democrats do and growing concern that an Obama administration will continue the U.S. "tilt" toward China that many in Japan perceive (in my view wrongly) as already underway. Making sure a few well-known Japan-hands are in senior positions at the State Department and National Security Council will help in this regard, as will naming a prominent, well-respected former official as ambassador to Tokyo – names like former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, former Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Nye or even former (Republican) Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage come immediately to mind. Former Vice President (and Nobel Laureate) Al Gore would be a particularly inspired (but probably unrealistic) choice.

Ironically, China also worries about having a Democrat in the Oval Office, although more so due to trade and human rights policies than because of any impact on U.S.-Japan relations – a more powerful House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has to be Beijing's greatest nightmare. Here President-elect Obama can send a very important signal just by repeating the "responsible stakeholder" phrase that has come to symbolize U.S.-China relations during President Bush's second term. While Beijing was initially suspicious of the term, the concern centered around who got to define what constitutes "responsible" – it has now become widely accepted and symbolic of a mutually responsible and cooperative relationship. Using this time-tested phrase – rather than inventing a new one which will then be overanalyzed for months – would provide a welcome sign of continuity in U.S.-China relations that would be well-received not only in Beijing, but in Tokyo and elsewhere throughout Asia.

As President-elect Obama and his foreign policy advisors turn their attention to the truly daunting challenges that will face them domestically and in the Middle East and other regions of the world, a few well chosen words supporting the

current six-party negotiating process and associated verification regime and providing reassurance to Tokyo and Beijing can go a long way toward setting the stage for an effective foreign policy in Northeast Asia in the years to come.

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