



### **Should Clinton Go to North Korea?** by Alan Romberg

In PacNet 46, Ralph Cossa argued that a visit to North Korea by President Clinton would be premature and potentially counterproductive to efforts to promote North-South dialogue on security issues. In PacNet 50, he argues that President-elect Bush should privately urge Clinton not to go. Some readers, including Alan Romberg (see below), have disagreed. What do you think? Please take a minute and fill out the short questionnaire and send it back to us and we will let you know the results early in the new year.

1. Should President Clinton visit Pyongyang prior to Jan 20, 2001 if a missile breakthrough is achieved or promised?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Undecided \_\_\_\_\_

2. Why/why not? (optional)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Nationality (optional):

U.S. \_\_\_\_\_ ROK \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

#### Response to PacNets 46/50

by Alan Romberg, Stimson Center

I disagree with Ralph Cossa on a possible trip by President Clinton. If the President can get a break through agreement on missiles (and here I assume we are talking of Nodongs as well as Taepodongs), he should take it. What we do in return will obviously have to be appropriate to what the North does, and maybe the price will be too high. But allowing momentum to die on this for a lack of willingness to make the trip would be self-defeating for U.S. – and ROK and Japanese – interests. Coordination with Tokyo and Seoul is essential. But a trip has been endorsed publicly several times by Kim Dae-jung so it can hardly be called “counterproductive” to his Sunshine Policy, at least not as he sees it. And Nodongs are a major concern for Japan. Moreover, this is not a “last minute” suggestion, having been on the table for at least several months – but only, to repeat, in the context of a substantial agreement.

I share Ralph Cossa’s view on the overall primacy of North-South relations for the future of the Peninsula. In addition, without progress on that track, prospects for the future of U.S.-DPRK relations, and North Korean relations with Japan, will be dim. And so, while there has been some recent progress in dealings across the DMZ, it still falls short of what is necessary, and I would like to see Clinton, if he goes, at least try to get Kim Jong-il to commit to a timetable for a visit to the South. But I see no reason why that trip needs to take place first as long as Kim Dae-jung not only isn’t bothered by the sequence but has welcomed it.

Any other U.S. “senior official” visiting North Korea will not be sufficient to pull off a deal. Ambassador Wendy Sherman would likely need to precede the President to nail down the deal, but she could not deliver any more than Secretary Albright could. Could incoming Secretary of State Colin Powell as the representative of the new Administration do so? Unclear, but far from certain; that depends on a lot of things happening (and not happening).

As regards the point about the APEC leaders’ meeting, my instinct is that a Bush meeting with Kim Jong-il in China is not a good idea. Mr. Bush could, conceivably, turn the November APEC trip into a Japan, ROK, PRC, DPRK trip – and I certainly agree he should go to Tokyo and Seoul before he goes to China. But my larger problem is that in the intervening year – that is, most of 2001 – we would all become hostages to fate. If nothing were to go wrong, perhaps it wouldn’t matter. But how confident can we be that, especially if Kim Jong-il gets turned down now, things would just hum along – including on the North-South track – for 11 months?

#### Ralph Cossa’s Response:

I share Alan Romberg’s concern about maintaining the momentum in U.S.-DPRK missile talks but am more concerned about the loss of momentum in North-South talks and the tendency of the North to avoid security-related discussions or otherwise reciprocate to all the South’s overtures. I believe that North Korea has been engaged in missile talks with the U.S. because Kim Jong-il understands that he has more to gain, politically as well as financially, from NOT selling or testing missiles than he stands to gain from doing so, and thus the dialogue will continue, albeit at a somewhat slower pace.

I also believe that whatever agreement is reached at this point will no doubt be controversial (and expensive) and will require the enthusiastic backing of the next administration in order to gain the approval of an increasingly skeptical Congress. Republican hard-liners are not likely to be much more lenient toward Mr. Bush on North Korean issues than they have been toward Mr. Clinton and human rights advocates on the left are likely to rediscover North Korea as an issue as the administration changes. It appears essential, therefore, that the next administration have a sense of ownership in whatever deal is reached, while still acknowledging the important role the Clinton team played in bringing it about. Regardless of its actual merits or motives, an “eleventh-hour” deal and hurried trip to Pyongyang by Clinton will be seen as a legacy-building effort which will be difficult for the next administration to defend, much less implement.