



North Koreans for Kerry: Be Careful What You Wish For by L. Gordon Flake

In their first presidential debate, President George W. Bush and Sen. John Kerry gave the issue of U.S. policy toward North Korea an unexpectedly high profile. In the process, this complex and difficult crisis was dumbed down to two contrasting slogans: bilateral talks vs. multilateral talks. Presuming this simplistic contrast indeed represents the primary difference between the two candidates' positions, it isn't unrealistic to presume that the North Korean leadership, and possibly other countries in the region that have been frustrated by our failure to make progress on this issue, would like to see Kerry elected. At a minimum, the Kerry camp's expressed willingness to try a new approach is likely seen to hold forth the promise of breaking the current stalemate.

Observers of the U.S. political process know well to be wary of drawing direct lines between campaign statements and policies subsequently pursued. However, since many an international conflict can be traced to the gap between expectations and reality, it is important to understand what "regime change" in Washington might really mean for U.S. policy toward North Korea.

Given the lack of detailed information about Kerry's approach, it is perhaps more useful to focus on the underlying political dynamics that will influence any such policy. If Pyongyang assumes that a willingness to engage in a dialogue presages a return to the relatively benign "engagement" policies of the Clinton era, they are likely in for a rude awakening. Given the underlying politics, it is plausible – if not likely – that a Kerry approach to North Korea could turn out to be more "hard line" than that taken by the Bush administration.

For all its rhetoric – labeling North Korea a member of the "axis of evil," indicating loathing of and distrust for Kim Jong-il, and most recently branding Kim a "tyrant" – the Bush administration has done surprising little in response to North Korean provocations and its dash across previously drawn "red lines" related to its nuclear program. Despite such inaction, the Bush administration has been shielded by its conservative credentials and has faced little pressure from conservatives in the U.S. Congress that were the scourge of Clinton-era attempts to engage the North.

A political axiom in the United States holds that "Only Nixon could go to China." In an era of strong anticommunist sentiment in the U.S., only a vocal conservative like Nixon could politically afford to engage the Chinese leadership. For a Democratic Party president, laboring under the stigma of being "soft" on communism, such an attempt would have been political suicide. A version of this dynamic is at play today. "Only Bush can ignore North Korea": a Kerry administration

would face very real political pressure to respond vigorously to North Korean provocations or intransigence.

That is not to suggest that a Kerry administration would be inclined to do anything less. In fact, one of Kerry's strongest criticisms of the Bush administration has been its failure to respond to what is apparently a North Korean nuclear breakout scenario.

A quick review of Asia advisors and likely players in a Kerry administration should give North Korea little reason for delusion. The antiproliferation credentials of many advisors to the Kerry campaign are well known. More importantly, the events of Sept. 11 had a profound impact on Republicans and Democrats alike. The American tolerance for risk is much lower than it was during the Clinton years and the loss of ambiguity and absence of denials regarding North Korea's nuclear program render a Geneva Agreed Framework-style resolution to this crisis almost unthinkable to either party.

While a Kerry administration would likely engage in negotiations with the North (and more earnestly at that), its demands would not be any less stringent. However packaged, the U.S. will continue to demand the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program. Given the events of the past two years, the bar of credibility, even should North Korea agree to return to compliance with its previous agreements, will remain prohibitively high. While a Kerry approach could positively alter the climate of the talks, it is also possible that rather than leading to a swift resolution of the current stalemate, a Kerry administration could quickly bring the crisis to a head.

A crucial question that must be asked of any sincere negotiation with North Korea is, "what happens if North Korea says, 'no'"? Here, the question of format becomes important. Here, also, deprived of the political luxury of ignoring North Korea, a Kerry administration would have little room to tolerate further erosion of the nonproliferation regime, or failure to make progress due to perceived North Korean intransigence.

The outcome of the November elections is unknowable. Nonetheless, all in Asia would be wise not to place too much emphasis in a change in leadership in Washington. As the saying goes, "Be careful what you ask for, you just might get it."

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