

North Koreans for Kerry: Be Careful What You Wish For

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In their first presidential debate, President Bush and Senator Kerry gave the issue of U.S. policy toward North Korea an unexpectedly high profile. In the process, this complex and difficult crisis was dummed down to two contrasting slogans, bilateral talks versus multilateral talks. Presuming this simplistic contrast indeed represents the primary difference between the two candidate's positions, it would not be an 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 the election of Senator Kerry. 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 the actual 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 a regime change in Washington might really mean for U.S. policy toward North Korea.

Given the paucity of detailed information regarding Senator Kerry's approach, it is perhaps more useful to instead focus upon 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. In fact, 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 and distrust for Kim Jong Il, and most recently in 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 the conservatives in the U.S. Congress who were the scourge of the 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 anti-communist sentiment in the U.S., only a vocal conservative like Nixon could politically afford to engage the Chinese leadership. For a Democratic 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 in the U.S. 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 Senator Kerry's strongest criticisms of the Bush administration has been of 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 anti-proliferation credentials of many advisors to the Kerry campaign are well known. More importantly, the events of 9/11 impacted 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 indeed 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 approach 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'?" It is in this regard that 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 non-proliferation regime, or failure to make progress due to perceived North Korean intransigence.

The outcome of the November elections is as of yet unknowable, however, all in the region would be wise not to place too much emphasis in a change in leadership in Washington. In the words of a common saying, "Be careful what you ask for; you just might get it."

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