

Policy Forum 04-41A: Debaters Bungled Korea

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Debaters Bungled Korea

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By Ralph Cossa

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I. Introduction

Ralph Cossa, President of the Pacific Forum CSIS, a Honolulu-based nonprofit research institute

writes: "if the situation on the Korean peninsula is serious as both candidates seem to agree and if nuclear proliferation is the greatest threat that America faces another common point of agreement then you would think the two candidates could at least get their facts straight and understand their own stated positions prior to an internationally televised debate."

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II. Essay by Ralph Cossa

"Debaters Bungled Korea"
by Ralph Cossa

Whether you are a Republican or 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. John 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 to denuclearize North Korea.

Questioned on whether he supported bilateral or six-party talks with Pyongyang, Mr. Kerry rightfully replied, "both." But he proceeded to talk exclusively about the need for direct U.S. dialogue with North Korea, without once mentioning that as clearly stated in his official pronouncements bilateral dialogue should occur within the context of the six-party talks, not as a separate initiative.

What is worse, the best he could say in response to the president's repeated assertion that bilateral talks would drive the Chinese away from the table was, "Just because the president says it can't be done, that you'd lose China, doesn't mean it can't be done." Neither candidate seemed to know that Beijing like Seoul, Moscow and even Tokyo has long encouraged Washington to deal directly with Pyongyang or that, in late June, a bilateral U.S.-North Korea discussion actually occurred, much to China'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," Mr. Bush has again undercut the credibility of his own negotiators while seemingly putting his personal disdain for North Korea's leader ahead of U.S. national security interests.

The key question, avoided by Mr. Bush and barely touched upon by Mr. Kerry, is whether direct dialogue, within the context of the six-party talks, would help or hinder achieving our objective, which is the complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

Before the debate, it seemed that the administration's answer to this question was a cautious "yes." Has the president "flip-flopped"? If there are any South Koreans who are still prepared to give the Bush administration the benefit of the doubt when it proclaims that it is willing to solve the problem diplomatically, they must be shaking their heads.

Mr. Bush was quick to "correct" Mr. Kerry that the problem with North Korea today is uranium enrichment, not plutonium. The real problem, of course, is both.

Initially, it was the discovery of North Korea's clandestine uranium enrichment program that prompted the current crisis. But while the Bush administration has been busy fighting with itself

over how best to proceed with hard-liners consistently attempting to undermine various diplomatic approaches the North Koreans have thrown out international inspectors, reprocessed 8,000 spent fuel rods, and now claim to have "weaponized" the extracted plutonium. These were the actions Mr. Kerry alluded to once in passing but did not seem prepared to focus on in the debate.

If the situation on the Korean peninsula is serious as both candidates seem to agree, and if nuclear proliferation is the greatest threat that America faces, another common point of agreement, then you would think the two candidates could at least get their facts straight and understand their own stated positions prior to an internationally televised debate.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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