


Policy Forum 05-38A: President Bush's Press Conference: Missing the Point!

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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 05-38A: President Bush's Press Conference: Missing the Point!", NAPSNet Policy Forum, May 05, 2005, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/president-bushs-press-conference-missing-the-point/>

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Policy Forum Online 05-38A: May 5th, 2005

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Ralph A. Cossa

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I. Introduction

Ralph A. Cossa, president of the Pacific Forum CSIS, a Honolulu-based non-profit research institute

affiliated with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, writes: "If the President truly wants a diplomatic solution he must surround himself with true diplomats . . . and he must speak and act diplomatically. Otherwise he will not only lose the diplomatic stand-off with North Korea but will lose the hearts and minds of the South Korean people as well."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Essay by Ralph A. Cossa

-President Bush's Press Conference: Missing the Point!

by Ralph A. Cossa

"It makes sense to put somebody who's skilled and who is not afraid to speak his mind at the United Nations." So said President George W. Bush during his spirited defense of his nominee for ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton. With all due respect, Mr. President, I think you missed the point.

The biggest problem with Mr. Bolton is that he does just that; he speaks his mind. As an under secretary of state these past four years, Mr. Bolton was supposed to be speaking then-Secretary of State Colin Powell's and his department's mind, not his own. Yet the tales of him openly disagreeing with, and on more than one occasion attempting to undermine State Department policy are legend. This is the real reason that his nomination should be opposed, not his egregious bedside manner (bad as it no doubt is).

As UN ambassador, Bolton will again be expected to speak his boss' mind, in this case Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and, through her, the president (presuming that they are both of one mind, an assumption that regrettably did not appear always to hold during the reign of her predecessor). Should Mr. Bolton get confirmed, Secretary Rice will have her hands full trying to keep him on message. (It was his infamous lack of loyalty and penchant for undermining his boss that apparently persuaded Dr. Rice not to select Bolton to be her deputy, despite reputed pressure from the vice president's office - the UN position presumably is the consolation prize - or so the rumor goes.)

This having been said, I feel I do owe Mr. Bolton an apology of sorts, however. Several years ago, I described him as "America's most undiplomatic diplomat." I was wrong! That title, in truth, must go to the diplomat-in-chief, President Bush. His lock on that title was achieved during the same April 28 press conference in which he defended the Bolton nomination.

During this internationally televised event, President Bush expressed his commitment to a diplomatic solution to the North Korea nuclear crisis, citing in particular the need for consensus among the other five participants in order to bring Pyongyang to the table. But he could not resist throwing in a gratuitous personal attack against North Korea's leader: "Look, Kim Jong-il is a dangerous person. He's a man who starves his people. He's got huge concentration camps," the President asserted, saying that one had to assume the worst "when you're dealing with a tyrant like Kim Jong-il."

All told, he mentioned the reclusive North Korean leader by name 12 times. While this falls far short of Bolton's record - he once castigated the Dear Leader by name more than 40 times in a speech which many South Koreans still cite as a blatant attempt to undermine the dialogue process - it was sufficient for North Korea to call President Bush a "hooligan bereft of any personality... and a Philistine whom we can never deal with."

President Bush no doubt believes all the nasty things he says about Kim Jong-il and they have the added benefit of being true. But to repeatedly say them publicly does not help the diplomatic process he professes his commitment toward, especially at a time when his chief negotiator, newly appointed Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, was visiting China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea to build the consensus that the president himself acknowledged was critical for his diplomatic approach to succeed.

The primary concern here is not what North Korea thinks. At the end of the day, it has more to gain from cooperating than from not cooperating and will likely allow itself to be bribed back to the negotiating table. The real concern is the impact that President Bush's statements are having on the other four members of the six-party process: China, Japan, Russia, and most importantly, South Korea. As the president has repeatedly stressed, the other members of the Six-Party Talks need to stick together and speak with one voice in pressuring Pyongyang to come back to the table. For this to happen, they have to believe that Washington is seriously committed to achieving a negotiated solution.

I have spent the last week traveling through five South Korean cities, speaking to college students and professors, security specialists, and non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives. I have met few people who believe that the Bush administration is serious when it says it is prepared to cut a deal with the current leadership in Pyongyang. Frankly speaking, I was not surprised. At a recent Pacific Forum conference on U.S.-ROK relations, I asked a group of about 40 American, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese regional specialists how many believed that the Bush administration was actually pursuing regime change and would not negotiate with Kim Jong-il under any circumstances. More than 90% raised their hands; this despite the fact that it is the stated position of the Bush administration, reiterated by President Bush, Secretary Rice, and yes, even by John Bolton, that it does not seek regime change in North Korea.

The repeated personal attacks against a leader who demands to be treated as a deity in his own country leads both the man on the street (especially in Korea) and the seasoned security analyst alike to the same conclusion; Washington's aim is to drive North Korea away from the negotiating table. This makes gaining an international consensus (and building the public support needed in democracies such as South Korea to sustain a bilateral relationship) increasingly difficult to achieve. How this serves America's immediate, much less long term national security interest is difficult to understand.

If the President truly wants a diplomatic solution he must surround himself with true diplomats... and he must speak and act diplomatically. Otherwise he will not only lose the diplomatic stand-off with North Korea but will lose the hearts and minds of the South Korean people as well.

P.S.: I was among the 10 percent who did not raise their hand. I still believe that the Bush administration is prepared to "hold its nose and deal with Pyongyang," as many are advising it to do. But I am finding it increasingly difficult to convince even myself, much less anyone else, that this is really true.

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.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development

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