

Why is President Bush Coming to Japan?
Commentary for
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President Bush will visit Japan because he needs help. He will stop briefly in Tokyo on October 17, 2003, en route to the Asia-Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) in Bangkok. The official explanation is that his airplane must refuel. This is true, but it is also a diplomatic way to justify why he will not stop in South Korea. For the first time in his two and one half year old presidency, Bush's popularity is sagging. Less than half of Americans approve of his performance as president. This is not good news for his Administration with the presidential election only one year away. But Kim Jong Il is certain to be happy about this and very likely to exploit the situation.

Bush's Economic Headache

President Bush's foremost problem is the sputtering US economy. The New York stock market has made impressive gains this year, but the unemployment rate remains high. His income tax cuts rallied wealthy Americans' financial support for his presidential campaign. But a large percentage of other American tax payers wonder why their tax cuts were much less. Also, federal taxes are down, but local taxes, especially on real estate, have soared upward. But Japan's economy seems to be rebounding after a prolonged recession. An increase in Japanese imports from the U.S. would be a big boost to America's economy.

Bush's Iraq Headache

Then there is Iraq. Recent developments have shifted American concerns away from weapons of mass destruction, which have not been found after several months of intense searching. A much greater concern is the gap between the expectations that President Bush and his administration created about Iraq, and the present reality. Americans are most unhappy about the increasing number of American soldiers who are dying or being severely wounded. Also, more American soldiers must remain longer in Iraq than originally suggested would be necessary. Then there is the cost of rebuilding Iraq. Only reluctantly did Bush reveal the future cost after he was compelled to ask the US Congress for another \$87,000,000,000. His request comes when the US government's annual budget deficit already is at its highest point in history, nearly \$600,000,000,000.

Prime Minister Koizumi already has been helpful by pledging \$1,000,000,000 to the United States for Iraq's reconstruction. Bush may hope he can convince Koizumi to give more. Also, he is certain to press Koizumi to encourage other nations to help. Bush also desperately needs Japan to send ground forces to Iraq to reduce the number of American soldiers who must serve there.

Why Not Other Allies?

President Bush's search for help elsewhere has achieved little results. His closest friend, British Prime Minister Tony Blair cannot help because he already is in serious political trouble, largely because of his previous help to Bush. Prior to the US invasion of Iraq, Bush and his closest advisers humiliated the UN Security Council by claiming that it had become "irrelevant." Ever since, Germany and France have been reluctant to do things accounting to Bush's desires. Russia also has politely deflected Bush's request that it send troops to Iraq. Bush got similar diplomatic rejections from India and Pakistan. South Korea is still considering the request and is expected to send some troops. Other than Britain, only relatively small allies like Spain and Poland have sent ground forces to Iraq.

Washington's Weakness is Pyongyang's Gain?

Preoccupied with US domestic problems and Iraq, President Bush has pushed the North Korean nuclear issue lower on his priority list. To accomplish this, he softened his stance toward North Korea. For two and one half years, his administration has insisted that it would not give North Korea any concessions until after it had verifiably dismantled its nuclear weapons programs. But early in September, Secretary of State Powell confirmed that the Bush Administration is now willing to provide North Korea the security guarantees that it wants. Pyongyang has gained a major concession from the United States by doing nothing more than attending one session of the six party talks in Beijing at the end of August.

Bush's shift has some benefits for the United States. It has eased tensions on the Korean Peninsula and improved prospects that the six party diplomatic process will continue. It will allow Bush to concentrate on the US economy and Iraq. Also, it prevents the United States from becoming isolated in the six party process. All the participants were pressing Washington to show some flexibility. Now that it has, the pressure is on Pyongyang to halt its nuclear weapons programs.

Bush, however, has drawn attention to the limits of US power. After proudly, and rather arrogantly claiming to the United Nations, that the United States "could go it alone" in Iraq, he is scrambling to get diplomatic, financial and military help.

Pyongyang is certain to take note of this. Kim Jong Il can be expected to try to exploit Washington's vulnerability by pressing harder for more concessions from Washington, Seoul and Beijing. This could complicate, and prolong resolution of the continuing diplomatic impasse in Northeast Asia over North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Also, Pyongyang may see Bush's willingness to visit Tokyo but not Seoul as suggesting continuing strain in US-South Korea relations. Pyongyang also can be counted on to try to exploit this situation.