

Reason for Changing Tactics - 2006

Deciphering this shift is by itself important, but understanding the causes behind it is crucial to determining its durability and prospects for future flexibility at the Six Party Talks. Some journalists have credited A/S Christopher Hill with the Administration's new flexibility, but this is highly unlikely. President Bush, as has been true of all his predecessors, relies on the Department of State to implement his policies. Decisions regarding goals and tactics are made at the government's highest level between the president and his small circle of "principles." In the Bush Administration, this means: President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretaries of State and Defense Rice and Rumsfeld, and National Security Council Director Hadley. Only they know for certain the reasons for his shift of tactics and acceptance of the September 19 Joint Statement. Nevertheless, a review of his Administration's public record is certain to highlight many of the key considerations in these decisions.

Bush's Domestic Concerns

The mother of a dead American soldier and "Mother Nature" conspired in late August 2005 to do what Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry failed to do one year earlier - severely erode domestic political support for the Bush Administration. The Bush Administration today faces an unprecedented surge of criticism. First a distraught mother seated herself on the road to President Bush's Texas ranch where he had retired for his usual month long summer vacation away from Washington. She demanded to see him. He refused. Slowly, she became the rallying point for American protests against the war in Iraq and criticism of Bush's handling of the war.

Mother nature then unleashed Hurricane Katrina. The subsequent human suffering and devastation stunned the American people. But even more stunning to them was President Bush's slow and initially passive response and his Administration's inept handling of the relief effort. Ever since, the Bush Administration has been on the defensive. He has become his own worst political opponent. His record on domestic policy is especially disappointing, even to his loyal conservative supporters.

President Bush now appears anxious to still his critics by achieving quick successes that will restore confidence in his judgment and his administration. Making a deal with North Korea could be his best opportunity in the area of foreign policy. President Bush's surprisingly quick sanctioning of the Six Party Talks' September 19, 2005 Joint Statement can be better understood in the context of his current political problems. This could explain why he abruptly dropped his hard line tactics last month and quickly agreed to the Six Party Talks Joint Statement of September 19. It would also explain why U.S. chief delegate to the Six Party Talks is hoping to travel to Pyongyang before the next round of talks in Beijing.

Understanding President Bush's abrupt shift regarding Pyongyang requires that we sit at his desk in the White House and look at the world through his eyes. Never during his five years in the White House has President Bush and his Administration encountered

such severe domestic political criticism. Bush needs some successes during the next few months to reverse the criticism, to sustain Republican support in the Congress and to salvage his presidential legacy.

But first Bush must deal with numerous serious problems. Some of his closest and most powerful advisers are in serious legal trouble. Bush's top aide on domestic political tactics, Karl Rove, is under investigation for possibly having broken the law by revealing the name of an undercover Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agent. Vice President Chaney's top aide "Scooter" Jackson is also under investigation in the same case. The former Bush White House staffer responsible for procurement policy, David Safavian, was indicted and arrested on September 19, 2005 for allegedly lying repeatedly to investigators. He has been linked to the alleged corrupt activities of powerful Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Abramoff is believed to have tried to illegally influence the votes of influential Congressmen by giving them expensive golf trips to Scotland, among other things.

In Congress, President Bush's closest political ally is in legal trouble. Grand juries in Texas recently indicted the most powerful Republican in the House of Representatives, Tom DeLany. He and his closest staff are accused of conspiring to break Texas campaign fund raising laws and of the more serious crime of money laundering. Delay and his aides allegedly collected money from Texas corporations, which state law forbids. He then is accused of having sent \$190,000 to the Republican National Committee to use in the 2004 Republican national presidential campaign, which is legal. But then he apparently asked the Committee to distribute \$190,000 to three Republican candidates in Texas to support their campaigns for election to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Further tarnishing the Bush Administration's image are two spy cases. A spy was recently discovered to have previously worked in Vice President Chaney's. The case involves a naturalized U.S. citizen from the Philippines who, as a U.S. Marine security official at the White House, allegedly took secret reports from the Vice President's office and gave them to the opponents of the Philippine president. In the other case, a Defense Intelligence Agency analyst confessed to giving secrets to Israel. These cases have raised doubts about the White House's ability to guard the nation's secrets.

More serious are conservative Republican attacks on President Bush's judgment. The most ardent critics are conservative Republicans. They are questioning Bush's judgment regarding the nomination of his personal lawyer, Harriet Miers, to become a Supreme Court judge.

Further plaguing the Administration is a growing list of domestic issues. After entering the White House in 2001, Bush converted the largest budget surplus in U.S. history into the largest deficit. He accomplished this by: increasing government spending for the war on terrorism, promising at least two hundred million for hurricanes Katrina and Rita reconstruction, expanding medical benefits for the elderly, and setting the goal putting more American astronauts to the moon, among other things. The US government now owes more than three trillion dollars and the debt is growing. Yet at the same time, Bush

slashed income taxes for the wealthiest Americans. Economists are concerned that this huge debt could increase interest rates around the world and ignite inflation. Bush's fiscal record has made conservative Republicans very uncomfortable because they prefer to reduce rather than increase the national debt.

Meanwhile, natural calamities have conspired with impressive economic development in China and India to spark a jump upward in global energy prices. This is contributing to inflation while also increasing political criticism of the energy policies that Vice President Chaney forged in close collaboration with leading US energy companies early in Bush's first term. Chaney's strategy accented using government inducements to encourage energy companies to intensify their exploration of new fossil fuel sources. Critics argue that the US government should be doing more to reduce consumption through conservation and the development of energy efficient technology. As the cost of gasoline and home heating fuels has soared, the American people have intensified their criticism of the Bush Administration.

In national security and foreign affairs, the president cannot point to a single major success. His once proudly proclaimed National Missile Defense (NMD) program, plagued by serious technical problems, has stalled. His loudly declared war on terrorism has yet to achieve a major victory. Osama Ben Laden has yet to be captured. The US military continues its struggle to suppress so-called "insurgencies" in Iraq and Afghanistan two years after President Bush declared "mission accomplished." Bush's armed assault on Islamic militants has excited opposition at home and undercut his diplomatic efforts to resolve the festering Israeli-Arab confrontation abroad.

Bush's presumptuous "pre-emptive nuclear counter-proliferation" strategy has failed to deter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Instead, the strategy may have convinced some nations, including European allies, that Bush once may have harbored reckless impulses regarding the use of the United State's superior military might. Also, the strategy may have convinced North Korea and Iran, the two surviving members of his now famous "axis of evil," to quicken development of their nuclear capabilities.

A string of embarrassing revelations also has eroded the Bush Administration's international credibility. After a long and intense search, Bush reluctantly admitted failure to find a single WMD in Iraq, which had been his primary rationale for invading Iraq. Bush's close ally in the war on terrorism, Pakistan and not his despised enemy North Korea, confessed to being the world's leading proliferator of WMD. Bush often cites Libya's surrender of its nuclear ambitions as an accomplishment of his non-proliferation strategy, but one could easily argue that London deserves the credit more than Washington.

Obviously, President Bush is eager for some success. North Korea may give him his best and quickest chance for this. Few Americans are concerned about North Korea. In their minds, it is a distant, impoverished and mostly theoretical threat. Iraq is of much keener concern to Americans and their political leadership. Politically, a quick deal with Pyongyang could gain Bush more politically than it might cost him domestically. The

small minority in Congress concerned about North Korea clearly prefers that he promptly work out a peaceful diplomat deal rather than risk yet another crisis that would further burden US military and fiscal resources.

Probably the greatest impediment to a quick deal could be convincing his own closest advisers to reverse their approach to North Korea. For five years Bush and his senior advisers have confidently insisted on an “all or nothing” strategy. While the president publicly berated North Korea’s leadership and threatened to pursue “other options,” he ordered his diplomats not to engage in diplomatic dialogue with their North Korean counterparts and not to reward Pyongyang for its past misconduct. Bush remained firmly committed to this strategy despite concerted concern in Seoul, Beijing, Moscow and eventually Tokyo.

Now, given all the other formidable problems confronting his administration, President Bush seems to have conceded that

- his previous strategy has failed,
- he has other more pressing priorities to worry about,
- he needs a quick success and he can achieve one with North Korea that most likely would earn him more domestic political support than it might cost.

President Bush occasionally has acted impulsively. But his most trusted advisers, Vice President Chaney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, are cautious and certain to urge that the President continue his tough bargaining with Pyongyang within the Six Party Talks framework. An indication of this is the firm opposition within the Bush Administration to Ambassador Hill’s desire to visit Pyongyang before the next round of Six Party Talks indicates that the administration. President Bush can be expected to continue pushing Pyongyang to concede his basic strategic goals such as the complete dismantlement of all its nuclear weapons programs. But his apparent eagerness for success could make the president more flexible in his tactical approach. Eventually, he might even agree to a phased, step by step rather than an “all or nothing” implementation of any agreement.

President Bush finally appears ready to pursue not just a peaceful but also a negotiated settlement of the nuclear issue. Working out the details is certain to take time and to spark disagreements, but clearly Bush’s need for success will auger well for achieving a peaceful resolution, and for the persistence of peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia.