Foreign relations - Northeast Asia

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During the 2004 presidential election campaigns, foreign policy was among the most important discussion topics, if not the most important. The primary focus remained on the Middle East, especially the “War on Terror” and the military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq. Generally, Bush campaigned for a continuation of his policy of defending America’s national security in the Middle East via limited multilateralism, while Kerry wanted a U.S. foreign policy that was more based on an extended multilateralism and diplomatic and military action through engagement of international institutions under American leadership. However, while the Middle East continued as the focal point on foreign policy issues, Northeast Asia persisted as an important concern as well.

The primary issue regarding Northeast Asia during the campaign was the perceived threat that North Korea constituted, and the proper way to handle it. This issue was amplified in the case of nations like North Korea, because of the possibility of it potentially putting nuclear weapons into “the hands of a terrorist enemy.”¹ Both President Bush and Senator Kerry perceived this as the biggest possible threat to the U.S. Still, Kerry accused Bush of negligence and inaction pertaining to the North Korean nuclear threat. He claimed that the Bush administration “first ignored the threat because it was preoccupied with Iraq, then played it down—thus leading Pyongyang to think we would accept a nuclear North Korea.”² Kerry argued for a different policy towards North Korea, an “agreement [which] must have rigorous verification and lead to complete and irreversible elimination of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program.”³ Kerry believed that pursuing this through the Six-Party-Talks only was not enough, and that the situation called for direct consultations between the U.S. and North Korea.⁴ The Kerry campaign also highlighted Bush’s decision to redeploy forces from the Korean Peninsula as inconsistent (likely meant to counter allegations of the Bush campaign).
that the situation called for direct consultations between the U.S. and North Korea. The Kerry campaign also highlighted Bush’s decision to redeploy forces from the Korean Peninsula as inconsistent (likely meant to counter allegations of the Bush campaign of being a ‘flip-flopper’) and dangerous, since it would send a signal of U.S. weakness to Kim Jong Il.\(^5\)

Other than highlighting the immediate and specific concern of North Korea, the Kerry/Edwards campaign’s foreign policy plans towards the rest of Northeast Asia—China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan—remained a rather generic continuation of what America had always done in the region, and what the Bush administration was more or less doing already. This included, as the Kerry campaign put it, engaging China, and encouraging it toward being a responsible international actor, all the while keeping to the ‘One China’ policy.\(^6\) The policy toward Taiwan was to be supportive of existing issues with the relation toward China, as well as keeping the commitments to defend Taiwan militarily.\(^7\) Pertaining to Korea and Japan, Strong relationships with Korea and Japan were to be maintained.\(^8\)

During his campaign, Bush defended his administration’s foreign policy toward Northeast Asia and, in particular, North Korea, portraying himself as the statesman.\(^9\) Concerning foreign policy in general, President Bush was clearly on the defense against Senator Kerry, who was well-versed in that regard. As a consequence, and as media analyses later showed, Kerry won the first presidential debate, the one debate focused on foreign policy.\(^10\) In regard to North Korea, Bush argued that he had inherited bilateral negotiations from the Clinton administration. These had ended in signing “an agreement with North Korea that was not being honored by the North Koreans,”\(^11\) as Bush had put it during one of the presidential debates. This, Bush argued, is why he began pushing for negotiations within a multilateral framework, the Six-Party-Talks. These talks, Bush explained, “included not only the United States, but now China. And China’s...got a lot of influence over North Korea,” possibly even more than the U.S.\(^12\) “If Kim Jong Il decides again to not honor an agreement,” Bush continued, “he’s not only doing injustice to America, he’d be doing injustice to China, as well.”\(^13\) Bilateral talks would have weakened this multilateral effort, according to Bush’s argument during the first presidential debate.\(^14\)

The debate surrounding policy toward North Korea thus seemed paradoxical. As mentioned above, Senator Kerry generally stood for a U.S. grand strategic approach along the lines of liberal imperialism. This strategy involved reaching U.S. goals through burden-sharing international institutions such as the United Nations and NATO, rather than participating in and paying for wars alone. On the other hand, President Bush’s campaign stood for a neoconservative approach to U.S. grand strategy, i.e. less multilateralism and less engagement with international institutions.\(^15\) And yet, in the case of North Korea, the two candidates’ roles seemingly switched: Bush supported a multilateral effort to combat the North Korean nuclear threat, whereas Kerry argued that multilateral negotiations needed to be supplemented by bilateral U.S.-North Korea talks.\(^16\)

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\(^6\) See Kerry, “Asia.”

\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) An example of this could be his reaction to a

http://cphcmp.smu.edu/2004election/foreign-relations-northeast-asia/

8 Ibid.

9 An example of this could be his reaction to a question in the first presidential debate being:
   “And in Crawford, Texas, Jiang Zemin and I agreed
   that the nuclear-weapons-free peninsula, Korean
   Peninsula, was in his interest and our interest and
   the world’s interest.” See Commission on
   Presidential Debates, “The First Bush-Kerry
   Presidential Debate: Debate Transcript.”

10 See, for example, “Presidential Candidates
   Debate (30 September 2004),” C-SPAN Video
   Archive. Available online at: http://www.c-span.org
   /video/183580-1/presidential-candidates-debate-
   full-screen

   , last accessed 16 May 2014, or CNN,
   “Polls: Kerry won debate,” CNN.com. Available
   online at: http://johnsmith.epointers.com
   /2004/ALLPOLITICS/10/03/election.poll/index.html

   , last accessed 15 May 2014.

11 Commission on Presidential Debates, “The First
   Bush-Kerry Presidential Debate: Debate
   Transcript.”

12 Commission on Presidential Debates, “The First
   Bush-Kerry Presidential Debate: Debate
   Transcript.”

13 Commission on Presidential Debates, “The First
   Bush-Kerry Presidential Debate: Debate
   Transcript.”

14 See Commission on Presidential Debates, “The
   First Bush-Kerry Presidential Debate: Debate
   Transcript.”

15 See, for example, “Presidential Candidates
   Debate (30 September 2004),” For definitions
   of these two grand strategies, see John J.
   Mearsheimer, “Imperial by Design,” The National
   Interest, No. 111 (January/February 2010), pp.
   16-34.

16 See Commission on Presidential Debates, “The
   First Bush-Kerry Presidential Debate: Debate
   Transcript.”

, last accessed May 14, 2014.


, last accessed 15 May 2014, and “Cheney and Bush were for a strong presence on the Korean Peninsula before they were against it (19 August 2004),” John Kerry for President Website (archived on 3 November 2004), Library of Congress Election 2004 Web Archive Collection. Available online at: http://webarchive.loc.gov/lcwa0016/20041001211553/http://www.johnkerry.com/pressroom/releases/pr_2004_0819h.html

, last accessed 15 May 2014.