

**President Bush Visit to Northeast Asia –  
Political Plus or Minus?**

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All world leaders travel abroad to demonstrate their ability to garner respect and to promote national interests. For the U.S. president this is particularly important since he claims to be a world leader. Such trips are designed to show the president negotiating enhanced security and trade arrangements. Undoubtedly, these were President Bush's priorities during his recent journeys to Latin America and East Asia. Neither trip, however, gained much benefit for either the United States or himself. Here we assess his recent visit to Japan, South Korea, China and Mongolia. At the start of the trip, National Security adviser Stephen Hadley urged reporters not to have high expectations about what the president might accomplish.

President Bush fulfilled Mr. Hadley's low expectations. Bush's tour of Northeast Asia did nothing to enhance his image in the eyes of the American people. If anything, it may have further tarnished it. The American people, preoccupied with problems at home, largely ignored the trip, just like most of the American mass media.

President Bush made the trip at a time when he needed to reassure the American people of his and his administration's ability to lead the United States. On the eve of his departure, Bush's job rating by the American people had dipped to its lowest level during his five year's in the White House. The US economy remains burdened by the largest federal government deficit in United States history. Rising gasoline and home heating fuel prices threaten inflation. Intensifying competition by foreign manufactures is prompting the layoff of tens of thousands of Americans. Federal government efforts to help the victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita recover continue to be slow, clumsy and of mixed effectiveness. Meanwhile, the American people are growing impatient with President Bush's management of the war on terrorism and handling of the situation in Iraq.

Inevitably, the American people hoped that President Bush would harvest benefits for US security and its economy. Further exciting such expectations was President Bush's just ended visit to South America. That trip had not gone well for President Bush and the United States. His presence had triggered violent anti-American and anti-Bush demonstrations. More worrisome to the American people, however, was the lack of any progress toward expanded US trade with its South American friends. Americans transferred their hopes US gains to Bush's East Asia trip.

But from the beginning, the trip was destined not to improve President Bush's image in the minds of the American people. He is at least partly to blame. He used a refueling stop at a US Air Force base in Alaska to attack his political critics in Washington regarding his handling of the war in Iraq. This ignited a fire storm of protest in Washington that persisted during his entire stay in East Asia. As a consequence, American newspaper and television news concentrated on the intense debate in Congress over the war in Iraq rather than President Bush's East Asia journey.

What little reporting Americans saw and read about the trip suggested that their president was enjoying a sightseeing junket. They saw him being wined and dined instead of grappling with their nation's worsening domestic woes. Even worse for the President, he seemed unable to promote US interests. He made no economic gains. Japan politely declined to restart US beef imports, once a major US export to Japan. The Chinese politely agreed but promised no concrete action to halt Chinese counterfeiting of US licensed goods that range from cars to Compact Discs. David Letterman, the comedian host of a popular late night television program, joked that President Bush had gone to East Asia to "visit US jobs." The joke suggested that Bush was doing nothing to improve employment in the United States.

Nor was Bush able to make any gains regarding US national security. Both in Japan and South Korea he affirmed US acceptance of recent bilateral agreements that reduce significantly the US military presence in both nations. His efforts to intensify economic and diplomatic pressure on North Korea to give up its nuclear ambitions were greeted with polite but largely perfunctory assurances that all share the goal of a nuclear free Korean Peninsula. But probably most worrisome for the United States, and embarrassing for President Bush, was South Korea's confirmation that it will soon withdraw one third of its troops from Iraq. Meanwhile, the Japanese government indicated that it too might soon withdraw a significant portion of its troops from Iraq.

A humbled President Bush quietly returned to Washington with little to show for his long trip except for his "historic" stop in Mongolia. Just before his arrival home, Ford Motor Company announced that it would soon layoff 10,000 workers and close plants. America's largest auto maker General Motors followed with an announcement that it would dismiss 30,000 workers and close several plants in the United States.

Obviously, President Bush returned home empty handed without any "*omiyage*" for the American people. This is certain to intensify criticism of him and his administration in the months ahead as they confront continuing economic woes and intensifying political debate over the war in Iraq. Meanwhile, prospects for achieving progress at the Six Party Talks toward a peaceful diplomatic resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue once again appear to be at an impasse.