

Whither China?

Josh Bolten, the White House chief of staff, had given all of us a little “countdown” clock, ticking away the remaining days of the Bush administration. I put it on the corner of my desk. There was still a lot to do, and I was very aware that we’d soon come to a “crossover point,” when other governments would start to look past us to the next administration. The flip side was that several leaders wanted to “finish” important business, since they believed that “the devil you know is better than the devil you don’t.” I wondered which camp Kim Jong-il would fall into. In the first quarter of 2008, it seemed that he wanted to “finish” the business with the Bush administration. There had been a thaw in 2007 during which the North Koreans carried out their obligations, allowing IAEA and U.S. inspectors on the ground where, as one press member put it, they “crawl[ed] all over the place,” even destroying equipment related to the nuclear program. The improvement in Pyongyang’s compliance coincided with the election of a new, tough-minded president in South Korea. It helped too that U.S.-China relations were on a solid footing. For a moment in the winter of 2008, it looked as though we might just get the North Koreans to make better choices. The North desperately wanted to be removed from the terrorist list, which identified countries engaged in and supporting terrorism. Somehow the North Koreans seemed to believe it signaled acceptance internationally, though they remained heavily sanctioned. But we were holding out until we could get a look at the declaration of their nuclear facilities, sites, and activities promised in the step-by- step plan that Chris Hill and Kim Kye Gwan had worked out the year before. Still, we were making progress and it was nice that the inauguration of South Korea’s new president could take place without a crisis on the Korean peninsula as the

backdrop. I headed the U.S. delegation to the event, enjoying my chance to get to know a distinguished guest accompanying the group, Hines Ward, the Pittsburgh Steelers' receiver. Hines is half Korean and wore traditional garb, a gesture that was greatly appreciated by our hosts. Sitting on the dais and looking out over the huge crowd, it was easy to forget that South Korea had come to democracy just two decades earlier having been ruled by autocratic leaders such as the staunchly anti-Communist Syngman Rhee since before the Korean War. The conservative businessman turned politician Lee Myung-bak addressed the crowd and then reviewed the troops of the Republic of Korea. It was an incredible sight in a country that had once been a military dictatorship. Then the Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra played Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," a fitting end to a remarkable celebration of freedom. I met with the new president later that day. We talked only briefly about North Korea since he was short on time and—not surprisingly—attention on his inaugural day. Yet I was really moved as I listened to his impassioned concern for the people of North Korea. "They are our brothers and sisters," he said, showing an empathy that was a far cry from the Korean official a few years before who'd despaired at integrating "brain-damaged midgets" should reunification occur. The administration had appointed a special envoy for human rights in North Korea. Jay Lefkowitz, a Washington lawyer with whom I had worked at the White House, had tried to find an entry point with our allies in the region to tackle this difficult problem. Many commentators and some in Congress criticized the State Department as insufficiently active in pursuing the cause of human rights in North Korea. But without a strong partner in the South there was little that we could do. For instance, Seoul under Roh had refused to enhance their abilities to broadcast into North Korea. Now, with a South Korean

president with greater interest in the human rights issue across the thirty-eighth parallel, I thought that we might make a new start—even in the waning days of the administration. That night I called the President to talk about my visit to China the next day. “Lee is going to be a great partner for you in the Freedom Agenda in Asia,” I told him. I was just sorry that the two of them wouldn’t have longer to work together.