

# Dealing with the North Korean Nuclear Issue

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I made my first visit to Pyongyang, North Korea, in April 2002 as a private citizen, representing The Korea Society, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that promotes greater awareness, understanding and cooperation between the people of the United States and Korea. On that occasion Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan asked me three questions. They were:

“Why is George W. Bush so different from his father?”

“How do you function effectively as a country when you elect presidents who have nothing in common with their predecessors?”

“Why don’t you understand us better?”

Those were good questions, and remain so today. They were asked by a highly intelligent man who has grown up in North Korea where, as scholar Bruce Cumings astutely puts it, the Kim family dynasty is as important as imperial succession is to Japan. In April 2002, the North Koreans were still reeling from being called part of the “axis of evil” by George W. Bush, after having been treated with warmth and respect by the Clinton administration in the closing months of 2000.

The speciousness of that accusation by Bush 43 has been revealed over time, but its immediate damage was severe, as it hung the same label on three countries, Iran, Iraq and North Korea, that posed widely differing challenges to the United States. Today, at last, the Obama administration is attempting to ameliorate the policies of the Bush administration by getting a clearer perspective on each of these countries. If the Obama administration succeeds in this attempt, I believe it is quite possible—well within a year—that the United States and North Korea will have launched serious, sustained negotiations, within the aegis of the Six-Party Talks, aimed at producing a Korean peninsula free of nuclear weapons.

My relatively optimistic view on this subject grows out of a series of events beginning in early August of this year, when former President Bill Clinton traveled to Pyongyang to win the release of two young American journalists who had been sentenced to 12 years at hard labor by North Korea for having briefly and illegally entered into its territory. Through messages relayed to Washington by the North Korean mission to the United Nations, the North Koreans had made it clear that they wanted President Clinton to

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\* *Author’s Note:* Assessments in this article are based in part on three meetings with South Korean President Lee Myung-bak (August 11 and 23 and September 21), a September 21 meeting with North Korean officials in New York, and discussions with senior US officials in New York and Washington on September 23.

be the person to whom they would hand over their prisoners. Pyongyang had invited Clinton to visit North Korea late in 2000 just before his presidential term ended. Clinton had wanted to accept the invitation, but time ran out. Thus, his acceptance of the rescue mission this year had deep symbolic significance for the North Koreans. I have looked at dozens of pictures of Kim Jong Il over the years, but I have never seen him look so deeply satisfied and content as he seemed to be while sitting next to President Clinton on August 4 of this year. (I must add, however, that Clinton looked deeply uncomfortable.)

Clinton, who is described in the September 27 *New York Times Book Review* by journalist Joe Klein as possessing “breathtaking...insights into the motivations of others,” was the first American to see Kim Jong Il for almost nine years. On September 20, President Obama was asked on CNN what had been the most interesting things told him by Bill Clinton after his return from Pyongyang. The president replied that Clinton reported that Kim Jong Il seemed healthy and in control, that he had “reasserted himself” and seemed less concerned about the succession issue. The president added that the six-party coalition was holding together well, and that UN sanctions were being implemented strongly. He appeared to be quite comfortable with the US posture toward North Korea.

There also are some indications of a potential shift in the thinking of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak during the past two months. On August 11, I met him in Seoul, and heard him take a clear and hard line toward Pyongyang, saying that the North Koreans showed no interest in even discussing the ending of their nuclear ambitions. He seemed sensitive to the harsh rhetoric being directed against him by Pyongyang. I suggested that perhaps he should remind them of what he had said in his presidential inaugural speech, in which he spoke of North Korea in friendly terms, and pledged to support the efforts to improve its per capita income through increased economic assistance and trade.

I next saw President Lee on August 23, as part of the US delegation to the funeral of the late President Kim Dae-jung. He had just met with a North Korean delegation to the funeral, and had been struck by the friendly tone they had taken toward him. He had stressed to them that once Kim Jong Il indicated his willingness to give up nuclear weapons, South Korea would take the lead in helping North Korea economically. He added that he was speaking to them as a friend, not an enemy, and that he and Kim Jong Il are basically the same age, with Lee only three months older than Kim. Lee’s tone was decidedly different than it had been twelve days earlier.

On September 21, I met President Lee at a private luncheon at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York that preceded the speech at which he proposed a “grand bargain” with North Korea. I asked Lee how he interpreted Kim Jong Il’s statement made to a Chinese special envoy, that he was willing to discuss nuclear matters in either bilateral or multilateral fora. (XINHUA reported that China’s special envoy, Dai Bingguo, had met Kim Jong Il on September 18, and quoted Kim as saying “North Korea will continue adhering toward the goal of denuclearization...and is willing to resolve the relevant problems through bilateral and multilateral talks.”)

Lee replied that his administration believes that the North Koreans have decided that they must interact more directly with the outside world. Seoul's assessment is that the North Koreans remain concerned about Kim Jong Il's health, and are being hit hard by the UN sanctions. In Lee's view, both these factors have moved the North Koreans toward dialogue. Lee also noted that the North Koreans have stopped "slandering" him since Kim Dae-Jung's funeral, and he was obviously touched by this change. He said that he wanted to establish real dialogue with the North Koreans, and through it to convince them that giving up nuclear weapons is in their national interest. He ended his remarks by saying "we must be sensitive to North Korea's needs."

Later on September 21, I met with two North Korean diplomats from Pyongyang's mission to the United Nations. The senior official said that US special envoy Stephen Bosworth has an open invitation to visit Pyongyang, and that North Korea remained open to negotiations on denuclearization. I asked if North Korea had ever demanded that it be treated as a nuclear power. His answer was that North Korea had never made such a demand, and had no intention of doing so in the future. He added that Pyongyang hopes that the Hatoyama government in Tokyo will be more "open" in its discussions with North Korea, and that he personally was pleased with President Obama's decision on missile defense. He said that North Korea remains strongly interested in having its State Symphony Orchestra pay a visit to the United States, and that it is open to discussions about having US Korean War veterans return to North Korea next year, to revisit the battlefields on which they fought sixty years ago.

On September 23, I had discussions with three senior American officials, all involved in North Korean issues. They acknowledged that they have an open invitation to send special envoy Bosworth to Pyongyang, and are seeking a commitment that he could meet Kang Sok Ju, First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, if he traveled to the North. Kang, who is a daily confidante of Kim Jong Il on foreign affairs, is senior to Kim Gye Kwan, and was prominently involved in meetings with Bill Clinton early in August. A major concern voiced by these officials was that at any bilateral meeting North Korea would demand that it be treated as a nuclear power. I sought to reassure them on this point by repeating what I had been told by the North Koreans two days earlier on that key issue.

One conclusion I draw from these contacts is that the United States and North Korea may be coming to the end of a period in which they have been talking past each other. The Obama administration did not see North Korea as one of its top priorities. After other candidates declined the job, the administration appointed Stephen Bosworth (an extremely able diplomat) as special envoy on a part-time basis to allow him to retain his position as dean of the Fletcher School at Tufts. The circumstances surrounding this appointment annoyed the North Koreans, who are extremely sensitive to any appearance of being slighted, and who have always sought the highest possible level of contacts and dialogue with the United States. When the North Koreans showed their displeasure by firing missiles and staging a second nuclear explosion, a general consensus emerged among the major players that they had badly over-reacted. These ill-advised moves served to turn the tide against North Korea, and caused the UN to launch strong sanctions against it with support from the United States, Japan, South Korea, Russia and China. Although

the recent conciliatory gestures by North Korea toward South Korea, the United States and Japan can be interpreted as consistent with a longstanding pattern of oscillation between brinksmanship and accommodation, another interpretation, which I favor, is that the North Koreans have realized that they have painted themselves into a corner.

In early September, North Korea announced that it was in the “final stage” of enriching uranium, and that it was continuing to reprocess and weaponize plutonium. Some observers took this rather jarring announcement as evidence that North Korea would demand to be treated as a nuclear power. I believe that it is possible to see this statement as an effort by North Korea to make clear to the outside world where it stands in terms of weapons development, as it preceded by only a few days Kim Jong Il’s statement to the Chinese envoy that he was willing to work toward denuclearization. Unlike Iran, North Korea now makes no effort to hide its nuclear weapons development programs, which it says are the only sure way to keep the United States from contemplating a military attack upon it, and which they will abandon only after receiving full diplomatic recognition by the United States, and the establishment of a full-fledged peace agreement replacing the 1953 armistice agreement and formally ending the Korean War.

The Obama administration has not yet decided how to proceed in the protracted and difficult dealings with Pyongyang. 2012 looms as a crucial year. It will be the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kim Il Sung’s birth, and is the year in which US Forces in Korea will hand over operational control of all military activities to South Korean forces. Kim Jong Il is a man whom it is generally believed has chosen his youngest son to replace him, and clearly wants a stable period of time in which to prepare his son for this vitally important role. Kim Jong Un, age 26 and North Korea’s heir apparent, had part of his early education in Switzerland, and thus has far more firsthand knowledge of the Western world than either his father or grandfather. If his accession to power in Pyongyang goes smoothly, it would be a potentially positive development that could hasten North Korea’s full integration into the family of nations. The time between now and 2012 is a fertile period for serious negotiations to take place.

I believe that the time has come for the United States to abandon any residual thoughts of pressing for regime change in North Korea, and to undertake serious and sustained negotiations with Pyongyang, involving both the Six-Party Talks process and bilateral negotiations. The specific objectives of these negotiations should be to end North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs, in return for which the United States would establish full diplomatic relations with Pyongyang, and formally bring the Korean War to an end.