



North Korea Trip Report

Selig S. Harrison

During the next three months, North Korea will unload its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, removing fuel rods that can be reprocessed into plutonium for more nuclear weapons. Once again, Pyongyang is offering to negotiate a freeze that would prevent further reprocessing, as it did in June, 1994, leading to the Agreed Framework, and as it has repeatedly offered to do in the six-party talks.

This is the good news emerging from my ninth visit to North Korea from April 5 to April 9. The bad news is that Pyongyang is no longer prepared to discuss the dismantlement of its existing nuclear weapons as part of the six-party process in Beijing. First Deputy Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju told me categorically that North Korea will no longer engage in discussions on dismantlement until the United States normalizes its economic and political relations with Pyongyang and makes a credible commitment not to continue promoting "regime change".

What this new posture means is that Pyongyang intends to keep the nuclear weapons it already claims to possess, but is prepared to rule out the enlargement of its arsenal by negotiating a freeze.

My meetings in Pyongyang included Kim Yong Name Nam, President of the Supreme People's Assembly (one hour), Kang Sok Ju (two hours), Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Gye Gwan, who has represented Pyongyang until now in the Beijing talks (five hours) and General Ri Chan Bok, the North Korean representative at Panmunjom (two hours).

All of them emphasized that North Korea now considers itself to be on a par with the United States as a nuclear weapons state and that the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula must now embrace "the U.S. nuclear threat in the peninsula and its vicinity" as well as the dismantling of North Korea's nuclear weapons.

This position was spelled out at length in a March 31 Foreign Ministry pronouncement calling for the removal of the U.S. nuclear weapons allegedly stored in secret at Kunsan and other U.S. bases in the South. However, it was clear that these are not serious immediate demands. North Korean inspections of U.S. bases in the South, I was told, would logically have to be accompanied by some form of inspection of North Korean nuclear facilities involving the United States, but such reciprocal inspection arrangements could only occur, as a practical matter, after the U.S. and North Korea have established normalized relations and have greater mutual trust.

What North Korea wants now is a start toward normalization with the U.S. in the form of direct bilateral talks with the U.S. A direct bilateral dialogue is regarded as an essential first gesture of a willingness to recognize and legitimize the North Korean regime. Six party talks could also be held, but Pyongyang's emphasis is on direct talks.

Kim Gye Gwan emphasized that North Korea is not seeking to impose preconditions for its participation in the six-party talks relating to the agenda, such as a U.S. willingness to discuss its March 31 demands. However, North Korea will not attend, he said, unless the United States "improves the atmosphere for the talks by making clear that it is not seeking regime change."

The formal North Korean position is that Condoleezza Rice should apologize for calling North Korea "an outpost of tyranny." But Kim Yong Nam said, "if they are not prepared to do that, there should be some other way to provide us with a justification to attend. It's up to them to find a way. The ball is in their court."

Similarly, Kang Sok Ju said that it was not enough for Rice to have said: "no one denies that North Korea is a sovereign state." I asked whether it would be satisfactory if she said that "the United States will respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the DPRK and is prepared for peaceful coexistence despite the differences in our social systems." "That's something we can accept," he said, but we want to hear it directly in open or secret discussions with the United States."

"We need a springboard to be at the six-party talks," Kang added, "some signal that the United States treats us with respect. We have to convince our Army and our people that we are acting in a way consistent with the dignity of a sovereign state that is respected as a strong military state. It's not a difficult thing to be at the six-party talks, but we can't do so if we are going there under pressure."

European diplomats in Pyongyang suggested that the May 9 Moscow ceremony commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II could provide the occasion for a conciliatory U.S. gesture toward Pyongyang. President Bush will be there, and so will a high-ranking North Korean, probably Kim Yong Nam. Ideally, Bush would agree to a brief meeting, with Kim, but even a respectful handshake would help to break the present stalemate.

Although Kang Sok Ju and Li Gun, Director of the American Affairs Bureau in the Foreign Ministry, told me flatly that the periodic unloading of the Yongbyon reactor would begin this month, I could not get them to say whether the unloading had already started, or to specify precisely when it would start. Similarly, all of those I met were vague about whether a nuclear test explosion was being planned, or whether one was even necessary.

When I asked Kim Yong Nam how he knew North Korea's nuclear weapons would work in the absence of a test, he replied, "The agencies concerned are convinced that they have all the preparations made properly, and that our nuclear weapons are operational." General Ri Chan Bok said, "there's no need for a test, and we don't want to have one, even one underground, because of the fallout. Without a test, our nuclear deterrent will be functional. We are ready to put warheads on our missiles whenever we want."

This statement suggested that the warheads are not yet on the missiles. It also prompted me to ask whether the North Korean deterrent consisted only of missiles, or also included air-deliverable nuclear bombs. "In the twenty first century," he replied, "it's hard for me to believe that any country would use air deliverable nuclear weapons."

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