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Pyongyang Waiting for the Spring

by Gavan McCormack

With the lunar New Year, in Northeast Asia the darkness of winter recedes, a pale sun gains strength, daylight hours lengthen and the earth stirs. However, in one of the bleakest and coldest corners of the region, North Korea, the land is still hard-frozen, spring is far off, and political frosts have not melted for more than half a century. Yet all extremes are eventually exhausted and yield, as yang to yin, and even for North Korea that time may not be far off.

Relations between the United States and North Korea, having edged right up to the brink of reconciliation and normalization in the last days of Bill Clinton's presidency, went into crisis with the advent of the Bush administration and have remained in a kind of eternal, roiling crisis ever since. After North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in January 2003, there were four sessions of talks aimed at break the impasse between the two countries: a three-sided meeting (the US, North Korea, and China) in Beijing in April 2003, and three subsequent "Six-Sided" meetings (that added South Korea, Russia, and Japan) in August 2003, February 2004, and June 2004. All parties agree that the nuclear and other problems can be, and must be, resolved through discussion; while North Korean officials claim that their country has no wish to possess nuclear weapons and is ready to give them up as long as its legitimate security concerns are met.

To many, it seemed that a new round of talks expected early in 2005 might actually achieve a breakthrough; some even thought the long-awaited Pyongyang Spring might be imminent. Then, came the North Korean Foreign Ministry's February 10th announcement that the country was indeed a nuclear-weapons state, that such weapons were necessary because of the American government's "ever-more undisguised policy to isolate and stifle" it, and that there was no point in resuming the talks so long as this hostility continued. Only "powerful strength," it said, "can protect justice and truth."

Heading into a Korean Winter

As George W. Bush began his second term, his administration reviewed its intelligence and policy on North Korea. On the face of it, the outcome seemed, at the very least, milder than the uncompromising hostility of his first year or so in office. This is perhaps hardly surprising, given that the ongoing war in Iraq has strained American military power to something like its limits and, for at least the last two years, Middle Eastern policy has simply absorbed all available Bush administration attention, in effect trumping the more muscular approach to various problems in Asia that America's neocons had long dreamed of.

Nonetheless, the overall effect of the Korean policy review was not so much to resolve the dilemmas on the peninsula, but to put forward a stance of studied ambiguity, of what might be called hostility-plus -- that is, plus readiness for some kind of deal. Late in 2004, U.S. government sources released accounts of what it called a "bold approach" toward settlement, which had apparently first been placed on the table in Pyongyang in October 2002 and was still open. If the North Koreans would suspend and dismantle all their nuclear programs (military and civil) under appropriate international inspection, address proliferation concerns about missile, biological and chemical weapons, as well as conventional arms levels and the lack of human rights in the country, the U.S. would, in return, "kick off negotiations" to convert the existing cease-fire agreement still in effect from the Korean War of the early 1950s into an actual peace treaty, push for North Korean membership in international financial institutions, and provide energy assistance and humanitarian aid. [1]

This "bold offer" was quickly overshadowed by other disputed matters and died stillborn in 2002. But it had itself been a study in ambiguity - a mix of generous-sounding promises all of which depended on North Korea's initial and comprehensive surrender to American demands. It was an offer made in order to rebut any future charges that the Bush administration had lacked interest in negotiating, and made on terms that it could be certain the other side would never accept. Now, as 2005 began, it was evidently back on the table, but so, it turned out, was the hostility.

In her confirmation hearings to become Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice struck an apparently upbeat note by declaring that the US had "no intention" of invading North Korea. At the same time, she explicitly included it among six "outposts of tyranny" that must be dealt with and proclaimed that the US stood with "the oppressed people" of all countries. For Pyongyang, "outpost of tyranny" must have sounded no less menacing than "axis of evil." President Bush himself, in his 2005 State of the Union address, had little to say about North Korea other than that the US was "working closely with governments in Asia to convince North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions." But he too stressed the ongoing US mission to extend "democracy" to the benighted regions of the world: regimes would have to embrace "freedom" either by changing themselves or by being changed. Against all this, at least since the Beijing talks began Pyongyang's message, often ridiculed as a stance of preposterous blackmail, had in fact remained constant: it simply sought concrete assurance of survival.

Late in 2004, under pressure from its Asian allies, the Bush administration had evidently decided to shift from talking about the need for "regime change" in North Korea to "regime transformation" -- a subtle distinction indeed. As Jeong Se Hyun, former Unification Minister in South Korea, commented, "I don't understand why the United States is beginning to say that. If you go from telling someone else 'I'm going to kill you,' to 'If you become a good guy I might not kill you,' what will the other guy think..." [2]

Whatever the words from Washington, the view from Pyongyang must have been grim. On October 19, the North Korea Human Rights Act was signed into law, having been adopted by a unanimous vote of both Houses. It widened the administration's playing field for multifarious potential interventions short of all-out war, both along the North's borders and via the airwaves. It also supported an "East European" model of undermining and destabilizing the regime by non-military means.

Behind such actions lay the long-term lobbying of various American neoconservative intellectuals with close ties to the administration. And they now chimed in as well. The right-wing Hudson Institute's Michael Horowitz, one of the authors of the Human Rights Law, on December 23 stated his belief that North Korea would implode within the year. He also spoke of the possibility of finding generals within the North Korean military prepared to work with the U.S. and using them to bring about a coup. "Defense Committee Chairman Kim Jong Il," he added, "won't be able to enjoy the next Christmas." [3] He also mocked the South Korean government, which is absolutely opposed to such an approach, as "hypercritical and irresponsible." [4]

In a similar vein, Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute, another prominent neo-conservative intellectual, wrote a November 2004 article entitled "Tear down this Tyranny." Like Horowitz, he directed his venom at both Korean governments, referring to "the pro-appeasement crowd in the South Korean government" who had turned that country into a place "increasingly governed in accordance with graduate-school 'peace studies' desiderata." [5] If the North Koreans needed another signal from the Bush administration, the appointment of Georgetown University academic Victor Cha as a Director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council was undoubtedly it. He had earned plaudits from neoconservatives for a 2002 article in the Council on Foreign Relations journal Foreign Affairs, later developed into a book, in which he argued for pressure to be brought to bear on Pyongyang by forming a "coalition for punishment." The priority he placed on "punishing" Kim Jong Il's regime suggested a view of "transformation" for North Korea that was blood brother to those being proposed by Horowitz and Eberstadt. [6]

There have been two strands to the Bush administration's North Korean nuclear concern: plutonium and uranium-based weapons programs. Under the Clinton administration's "Agreed Framework" deal with Pyongyang, North Korea's graphite reactor had been shut down and its accumulated plutonium wastes frozen under international inspection between 1994 and 2003. The breakdown in relations that occurred under Bush, however, meant that the reactor was restarted, new wastes began to accumulate, and the pre-existing 8,000 fuel rods were removed from the site and, according to the North Koreans, processed into weapon fuel. This program, however, was not controversial, in the sense that Pyongyang has repeatedly offered to sacrifice it as part of a comprehensive deal. The Bush administration, in dismissing any possibility of such a deal, has concentrated on an alleged North Korean "second track" weapons program, based on uranium. This matter is highly controversial.

The basis for this "second-track" charge was the claimed confession of a Pyongyang official to Deputy Secretary of State James Kelly on a rare Bush administration official visit to Pyongyang in October 2002 that it had a secret uranium enrichment program. That confession, in turn, was supposed to have prompted the U.S. to suspend its Agreed Framework commitments (in particular the pledge of 500,000 tons annually of heavy oil). Soon after, North Korea withdrew from the Agreed Framework and the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

No confirmation, however, has ever been forthcoming for the US claim. North Korea denies any such "confession," and South Korea, China and Russia have all expressed skepticism about such a nuclear program despite dogged Bush administration efforts over the last two-and-a-half years to persuade them of its existence. Not only has Washington been unable to persuade allies and negotiating partners, but it has failed to persuade its own intelligence and diplomatic community as well. The January-February 2005 issue of the establishment journal on foreign policy, Foreign Affairs, carried a powerful dissenting article by Selig Harrison, former Washington Post journalist who is now Senior Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center and also chair of the "Task Force on U.S. Korea Policy," an influential group of ex-diplomats, officials, and academics. Harrison argued that the U.S. had deliberately distorted North Korea's statement in order to put a halt to the moves towards reconciliation between Pyongyang, Seoul, and Tokyo, that its negotiator had only said it was "entitled" to such a program or "an even more powerful one" to deter a preemptive US attack. Washington had done this, he argued, to step up pressure on Pyongyang and to stop U.S. allies from any compromise with "evil"; from, that is, appeasement. [7]

The Magic Bullet of Intelligence

Whether or not it was designed to do so, Kelly's October mission to Pyongyang certainly nipped in the bud promising signs of an East Asian spring. An all-Korean summit of June 2000, the fruit of a new South Korean "sunshine policy" toward the North, had been followed by a spate of economic cooperation and trust-building deals on the peninsula. In September 2002, Japan had joined the process and, for the first time, a vision of a new, regional East Asian "order" in which the United States, for the first time since the Korean war would have no defined role, had been officially declared in the most unlikely of settings -- a meeting between North Korean leader Kim Jong Il and Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi. This dramatic and startling picture of a future Asia would soon be buried in an ever more sensational, headline-grabbing dispute about Japanese citizens who had been kidnapped – in some cases decades previously -- by the North Korean regime. Despite the rancor that ongoing dispute engendered, both sides remain officially committed to such a new order.

In Harrison's view, Kelly's charges, which were headline grabbing in the United States, depended on an exaggeration of dangerously minimalist intelligence, or, as he put it, the "treating of a worst-case scenario as revealed truth." North Korea, he agreed, might possibly have a secret program to produce low-enriched uranium (LEU), the fuel used to power light-water plutonium reactors, which would indeed put it in technical violation of the Framework. It was unlikely, however, that its scientists had solved the far more technically difficult task of turning it into high-enriched uranium (HEU) for weapons purposes. He simply did not accept what Washington alleged: that the North had an advanced program that would have enriched uranium weapons ready for deployment by "mid-decade."

In November 2004, Harrison's "Task Force on U.S. Korea Policy" had already issued a paper, "Ending the North Korean Crisis," critical of the administration. [8] If this paper, with its detailed policy proposals, was the first public broadside against the administration from middle-of-the-road members of the intelligence, academic, and bureaucratic communities, Harrison's Foreign Affairs article was the second, attacking the very fundaments of Bush policy-making.

In response, official Washington ratcheted up its efforts both at home and abroad. A riposte by Robert Gallucci, the official who helped negotiate the 1994 Agreed Framework with Pyongyang, and Mitchell Reiss, head of policy planning at the State Department during the first George W Bush administration, appeared in the very next issue of Foreign Affairs. [9] They insisted that enrichment was enrichment, and the danger of uranium, enriched to whatever degree, being either weaponized or exported was real. At the same time, Michael Green, the National Security Council's newly-appointed Senior Director for Asia, was dispatched on a tour of Asian capitals to try to bring various allies into line. He evidently reaffirmed the Kelly line on enrichment, perhaps by offering additional intelligence, and claimed as well that North Korea had been guilty of the grave offence of proliferation through supplying uranium hexafluoride (a component for nuclear weapons manufacture) to Libya. The evidence for this latter claim is not known in full, but the preliminary response of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was that the case was at best inconclusive; at worst, as one member of the IAEA put it, it was "hard to believe." [10] Harrison continued to insist, in a New York speech on February 16, that it was "reckless to base policy on worst case scenario intelligence driven by ideology." [11]

So bureaucratic war raged in Washington on the Korean issue – and this took place against a backdrop of the previous year's devastating revelations of the ways in which the administration had used wholesale political intelligence distortion and manipulation to justify its much-desired war in Iraq. Beyond Washington, at least, the thought that Harrison might be right and that the Iraq intelligence process was now only being repeated in relation to Korea occurred to many. The credibility of Washington's search for a "magic bullet" of intelligence to crush alternative policy lines in Asia had been badly eroded by the intellectual, political, and moral capital squandered in Iraq.

Can There Be a North Korean "Soft Landing"?

As for North Korea itself, Kim Jong Il's regime in Pyongyang appears to have passed through the worst of its long and disastrous economic crisis that stretched back into the 1990s and to be embarked on a process of gradual but far-reaching change. A

generational shift seems to be proceeding within the bureaucracy where it is clear that the "Chinese model" is being studied and adapted to Korean circumstances. Markets proliferate; Pyongyang now is reported to have 350 restaurants and 150 karaoke bars; student cafeterias have begun to serve hamburgers; and 24-hour stores are appearing. As South Korean culture and fashion comes to be known and appreciated, through pirated videos and via an increasing reliance on Chinese cell telephones, the government has begun to campaign against young men growing their hair long, suggesting that, as in Japan and much of Asia, North Korea too may be experiencing a wave of Seoul youth and fashion culture.

In other words, change on many fronts is underway, even under the Kim Jong Il regime, and largely unnoticed by the Bush administration. While U.S. (and Japanese) conservatives dream of overthrowing Kim, there is a possibility that North Korea's present leader may be the most likely candidate to push through reform and an opening to the world in an otherwise highly conservative, repressive, and closed society. Jeong Se Hyun, South Korea's former Unification Minister, believes that social change generally proceeds through three stages -- symbolic, significant and fundamental -- and that North Korea is now at the second of these stages. He insists that "[n]o nation has ever gone back on reform and opening up," and is critical of American officials for their lack of sensitivity to North Korean pride and their lack of awareness of the need to consider "face" as a crucial element in any negotiation. [12] Quite apart from the devastation that the sudden overthrow and collapse of the present regime would likely visit on the region -- a fearful prospect for both the South Korean and Chinese governments -- the possibility that forces more opposed to economic liberalization, more-anti-U.S., anti-China, anti-Japan, and anti-South Korea might replace Kim Jong Il in the chaos is too rarely considered by those who see him simply as another worst-case dictator to be toppled.

In its 2005 New Year message to the world, North Korea referred to the "growing danger" of nuclear war, but made no reference to its own nuclear plans and issued no threats. Since then, senior North Korean officials informed Congressman Curt Weldon (R-Pa), Vice-Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, that their country was indeed a nuclear state. (This has, in fact, been a constant refrain of the North Koreans since 2003, whether true or not.) They assured him, however, that they had no interest in maintaining a nuclear status once the regime's security concerns were met, and that their government would then respect the United States and "treat it as a friend" provided that the Bush administration did not ["]slander["] it or ["]intervene in its internal affairs.["]

Although Weldon, a prominent Republican conservative, described his talks as "an overwhelming success," slander and intervention are precisely the kinds of activities likely to be authorized under the Human Rights Act. After all, Eberstadt and Horowitz are calling for outright hostility and Cha for punishment. So whatever ambiguity may remain in the messages of the President and the Secretary of State are unlikely to quell North Korean doubts and suspicions. What the Kim Jong Il regime seeks now, as it has through the past decade, is an end to the siege under which it exists and removal of the American nuclear or military threat as well as further normalization of political and economic relations with neighboring counties and with the world. On his previous visit to Pyongyang in mid-2003, Weldon actually made a series of detailed proposals to this end to which his hosts had responded positively. His hopes that a breakthrough might come and a deal be done were, however, dashed with the Foreign Ministry's official nuclear announcement on February 10.

The persistent, intense efforts of the Bush administration to turn the "Beijing Six" group into a "coalition of the willing," capable of exerting systematic and sustained pressure on Pyongyang, continue to falter in the face of chronic dissent and policy disunity. The sharpest differences have arisen between Washington and Seoul. South Korea, which naturally has the greatest at stake in the fate of Kim Jong Il and his regime, increasingly defines the issues as peninsular rather than global and demands a voice in the outcome at least as great as Washington's. It accepts the legitimacy of North Korea's plea for "security" and "normalization," believing that the flow of refugees from the North will best be stemmed by allowing reforms to take root there and then nurturing them. American plans to destabilize and overthrow the Pyongyang regime fill it with alarm.

To the extent that South Korea's stance is broadly supported by the Chinese and Russian governments, it amounts to a near "majority" position in the Group of Six. Even Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi tends to incline towards or defer to South Korea on crucial peninsular issues -- not only in an insistence that any resort to war is out of the question but in his readiness to offer aid to Pyongyang as well as his encouragement of the idea of a future regional community that would include North Korea.

In the case of Koizumi, however, there is an important qualification. In Japan, all other issues have become subordinate to resolving various vexing questions about the abduction of Japanese citizens a quarter century ago that still remain on the table. Subject to that uniquely Japanese consideration, Koizumi's Japan is inclined, like the government of South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun of South Korea, to want to find a path that will lead North Korea to a "soft landing."

In a major speech in Los Angeles in November 2004, South Korea's president shocked Washington by declaring that there was "some justification" for North Korean claims to a right to develop nuclear weapons and missiles in order to protect itself against the American threat (though, of course, he did not actually name the threat). [13] One US government official described this statement as tantamount to "suicide terrorism." [14]

In January 2005, South Korean Unification Minister Chung Dong Young, in a major speech in Berlin, styled Korea as the "greatest victim of the Cold War." He promised that war on the peninsula henceforth was "impermissible" and instead that both halves of Korea would move forward on the principles of ["]no war, peaceful coexistence, and common prosperity,["] with South Korea offering "comprehensive and concrete aid," including food, fertilizers and agricultural machinery for the agriculture sector, from the moment North Korea began the process of giving up its nuclear program. [15] A few days later at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, he added the express hope that Kim Jong Il would accept an invitation to attend the November Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Pusan. Even the conservative South Korean opposition Grand National Party's think-tank now calls for "accommodative engagement" with the North and a "Marshall Plan" of incentives to aid Pyongyang. Park Jin, one of its senior figures and a likely presidential candidate in 2007, now describes the relationship between South and North as one between a ["]husband and wife["], with South Korea "trying to help a spouse come back who left home after a huge fight." [16] Though Park Jin's party should be the prefect ally for the Washington neoconservatives, they see this kind of thinking as puerile, "peace-studies" appeasement, no matter who espouses it.

Singing with the President

In Japan, Koizumi, though faithful to Washington on almost all issues, shows signs of independence on North Korea. It was, after all, his visit to Pyongyang in September 2002 -- about which he informed Washington but without consultation of any sort --- that set off the present crisis. The Pyongyang Declaration, issued after his first meeting with Kim and never repudiated by either side, remains a clarion call to reconciliation and to the formation of a Northeast Asian community, something in which the US role remains undefined, an unspoken challenge to Washington.

In May 2004, Koizumi made a second visit to North Korea. On his departure for Pyongyang he spoke about normalizing the abnormal relationship between Japan and North Korea so that "hostility" could be "turned to friendship, confrontation to cooperation." [17] It was an agenda poles apart from Washington's. Koizumi, it seems, is on a mission to close the books on Japan's twentieth century colonial empire and thereby secure for his country a central role in the emerging community of twenty-first century Northeast Asia.
Later, asked his impression of his North Korean opposite number, Koizumi reported to the Japanese Diet:

"I guess for many his image is that of a dictator, fearful and weird, but when you actually meet and talk with him he is mild-mannered and cheerful, quick to make jokes ... quick-witted." [18]

In other words, he confirmed that Kim Jong Il was a man to do business with.

Most foreigners who meet him have reacted similarly, including among others former South Korean President Kim Dae Jung and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. So keen did Kim profess himself to be when it came to talking with George W. Bush that he asked Koizumi to provide music that they could sing to together -- till, as he put it, their throats dried out and became sore. [19] By contrast, the American president says with great feeling that he "loathes" Kim Jong Il and could never possibly deal directly with him.
After the second trip, Koizumi pledged to normalize the Japan-North Korea relationship in his remaining two years in office -- if possible within a single year. [20] In the months that followed, Kim Jong Il's request to sing with President Bush seems to have weighed on Koizumi's mind, so that when he met with George Bush later in the year he urged him to consider such a meeting. The President's response, we are told, was a stony silence; [21] and while an American president's wish may be tantamount to a command to a Japanese Prime Minister, the reverse can never be true.

The Korean abduction of Japanese citizens during the late 1970s and early 1980s remains a enormous thorn sunk deep in any attempt to achieve the sort of normalization Koizumi seeks. The North Korean leader did apologize in 2002 for the abduction of thirteen Japanese citizens, and by 2004 had returned to Japan five survivors and their families, but it was the explanations offered for the deaths of the other eight around which controversy swirled. When Japanese DNA analysis indicated that what North Korean officials proffered in 2004 as the remains of Yokota Megumi, a young woman abductee, were actually those of two unrelated people, the shock and outrage in Japan was deep and lasting. Since then, the demand for the imposition of sanctions on the North has grown and moves have begun in the Japanese Diet to pass a Japanese version of the U.S. North Korean Human Rights Law.

Early in February 2005, a statement signed by five million people demanding the imposition of sanctions was presented to the government. Most Japanese favor such a course of action because they believe that Kim Jong Il as a dictator is responsible for everything that happens in his country and so they are convinced that he has been deliberately tricking and deceiving Japan about the abductees.

Koizumi, who alone has met and formed his own assessment of Kim Jong Il, remains cool to the idea. Although he shares in the popular anger at the thoroughly unsatisfactory nature of the abductee explanations that have so far been offered, he may well find credible what Kim told him in 2002: that "some elements of a special agency of state," long since abolished, had been responsible for the abductions, and that such things would never recur.

If indeed Kim's power does not fully extend to those "special agencies of state," the remaining mysteries concerning the abductees may only gradually be cleared up as part of a future process of normalization -- as was the case of the fate of orphaned Japanese children left behind in China at the end of World War II. Only after normalization and the opening of diplomatic relations with China in the 1970s, did information on these children become available. While Koizumi persists in his demands for North Korean explanation of the Yokota remains and clarification of the circumstances surrounding the fates of other abductees, he remains committed to reconciliation and normalization. Around him, however, the mood in his party and in the country at large has been hardening.

Toward a Pyongyang Thaw?

North Korea's statement that it has nuclear weapons and is uninterested, at least for the time being, in the resumption of the six-sided talks represents a step back from a Pyongyang spring towards mid-winter. Washington is now said to be considering a possible referral of the matter to the United Nations Security Council for international sanctions or even trying to convene the six-sided talks without North Korea – that is, in one way or another simply stepping up the pressure. China is said to be angry that its efforts at conciliation have been dashed. South Korea frantically counsels reason and moderation on all sides and its "sunshine" policies are tested as never before. All the while, North Korea moves ever closer to being a de facto nuclear power with inevitable destabilizing consequences on the region, especially on Japan's future military posture.

If North Korea seems more isolated than ever, however, the disarray among the other five partner countries is also plain, as are the deep, unresolved contradictions between Bush's Washington, already frustrated and limited in its policy options by its endless occupation and war in Iraq, and the Asian allies it would like to support its projected global order. The Japanese prime minister, the Bush administration's closest partner in Asia, has publicly pledged to normalize relations with Kim Jong Il's North Korea and has begged the President to meet one-on-one with Kim; China stated after the last round of talks in Beijing that American policy towards the North was the "main problem we are facing"; and South Korea's president believes North Korea is "not without cause" in its nuclear weapon program, encourages multifaceted cooperation across the DMZ, and has invited President Bush to join him on a visit to the new joint South-North industrial development zone just north of the old Korean war dividing line that was once so impermeable.

What for Washington is a matter of how to stop a nuclear-weapons program and/or overthrow a strange and distant dictator, for other countries in the region is a much more essential problem which lies so much closer to home: how to bring North Korea first into the community of Northeast Asia and then into the larger global community. In Washington's view, North Korea is simply troublesome, lunatic, or evil, and there can be no truck with it; as its Asian neighbors see it, North Korea's demand for security, however shrill, contains within it something that, from their own histories, they recognize as essentially just. The six-sided forum, despite the present impasse, is probably still the best, perhaps even the only way forward, providing as it does a forum for regional powers to exert pressure not just on North Korea but on the United States as well. It offers just about the only hope for overseeing the inevitably protracted process of detente leading to resolution.

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