

VOA Note #11

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PLACE: New York – US Mission to the UN

Event: Let the Talks Begin

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The American delegation to the first US-DPRK diplomatic negotiations (the US-DPRK diplomatic meeting in New York in January 1992 was an exchange of views without negotiations) arrived from Washington early on Tuesday morning June 1. We gathered in a small meeting room in the US Mission to the UN's Political Section. Chief Negotiator Bob Gallucci, then State Department Assistant Secretary for Politico-Military Affairs, was his usual informal and affable self. After admitting that he knew little about North Korea, he expressed confidence that the negotiations would move quickly toward the conclusion desired by the US, i.e. North Korea would stay in the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. His reasoning was that Pyongyang's priorities were to get benefits ("carrots") from the US and to stroke Kim Il Sung's ego by engaging in the first ever diplomatic negotiations with Washington.

He then led the delegation upstairs to review the meeting room – the conference room on the mission's top floor. It was a very large room that covered most of the floor. Four tables had been arrived, two on each side facing toward the center of the room. Eight executive leather chairs, four on each side were placed facing toward the center. Two pairs of US and DPRK flags were arranged on the tables. At the entrance to the room there was a coffee maker with cups and on one side a telephone.

Bob sent me down to the entrance to the mission to greet the DPRK delegation when it arrived. Hordes of journalists and photographers greeted me on the side walk. Blue wooden barriers and burley New York policemen kept the shoving crowd from reaching the steps that led to the mission. Unknown to me, a Japanese journalist I had met in Pusan, Korea during the huge anti-Chun Doo-hwan demonstrations of May and June 1987 was among the journalists and took a series of photographs that he later gave me. (He is now an editor for Yomiuri Daily in Tokyo.)

DPRK Chief Delegate Kang Sok Ju and his team arrived in a motorcade of black American cars. Kang and I shook hands as I led him into the building past very nervous Marine guards (they had never seen a North Korean). Inside the elevator the Marine guard said nothing as we rode to the top floor.

Once the entire DPRK delegation had arrived, I told them no smoking would be allowed during the talks – they were stunned, especially Kang Sok Ju who was a heavy smoker, they could not leave the meeting room except to go to the bathroom on the same floor, and they could use the single telephone located on the floor. I then introduced the DPRK diplomats to the US delegation. Coffee was served (self service) and to everyone's surprise, the North Koreans eagerly engaged in friendly chit chat in surprisingly good English except for one North Korean. He turned out to be a member of the Korean People's Army and eventually disappeared from the talks.

Gallucci invited Kang, the "guest," to making the opening statement. Kang promptly launched into a rambling political tongue lashing of the United States, delivered in

loud and assertive Korean. His interpreter proved a very capable translator. Later, as the session's note taker, I asked for a copy of the text and was handed an English language version. The main theme was that the United States' "hostile policy" was to blame for the nuclear problem and that the IAEA's "impartial" attitude toward the DPRK accounted for North Korea's unwavering decision to pull out of the NPT.

After Kang finished, a coffee break followed and then Gallucci responded. He delivered his remarks in a low key voice without any assertiveness. We then broke for a two hour lunch with each delegation heading in a different direction.

Clearly both sides were venturing into uncharted waters. Neither had ever so much as had informal chats, much less discuss history making problems. Gallucci demonstrated admirable leadership and humility by gathering his delegation together to explore their interpretations of the morning's exchanges and to seek advice on how to proceed. It also became apparent that Washington would have to allow him greater flexibility on how he handled the talks. Also, his early optimism about achieving "victory" had completely evaporated by lunch time. We all realized that we were in for a very difficult, drawn out process of negotiations. Clearly, the North Koreans had not come to stroke Kim Il Sung's ego and to win was carrots. They had come to press the US to change its attitude and policy toward the DPRK or else they would build a nuclear arsenal. Also, despite North Korea's legendary "isolation," Kang's self confidence was unwavering despite having to confront the United States on its home turf. Clearly Kang was motivated by intense patriotism for the DPRK, loyalty to the "Great Leader" and an intense dislike of the United States, for reasons I would learn later.

Not everyone on the US delegation agreed with this perspective. The Defense Department representatives advocated the hardest line approach to the talks, in large part because they viewed dealing with North Korea through the distorting prism of the Military Armistice Commission talks at Panmunjom. But these had never been "negotiations." Instead, the Panmunjom talks were shouting matches designed to demonstrate each sides loyalty to their nation and not aimed at forging a diplomatic resolution to a problem. Fortunately, Gallucci was both a patient negotiator and a capable teacher. Through his patient persistence, he convinced his critics from DoD that his approach was in the best interest of the USA.

The next two days proved to be equally trying. Kang had all kinds of curb balls to throw at Gallucci but Gallucci was not easily unnerved. He persisted to explain what he could or could not do to achieve a deal. Finally on Friday, after a fruitless morning exchange, Gallucci told Kang that the US delegation would be traveling back to Washington, DC for the weekend. He invited the North Koreans to either head home or linger in New York. In any event, if they wanted to continue the negotiations, they should call me at my home on Monday morning. With that, we sent the DPRK delegation back to their hotel – the Park Helmsley on 5th Avenue and the US delegation head to La Guardia and the flight to Washington. I stay behind to explain to the various security people – US Marines, Diplomatic Security, FBI, etc. what was going on and how to get in touch with me. I then returned home after a ten day stay at the New York Helmsley on 42nd Street where the US delegation had stayed.

C. Kenneth Quinones - 2008