

**VOA Note #15**

**DATE:** July 3, 1993

**PLACE:** Geneva Chocolate Shop

**Event:** DPRK Threat to Pull out of the Talks

**Participants:** DPRK Ambassador Ho Jong, DPRK Foreign Ministry officer Li Yong Ho and US State Department North Korea Affairs Officer C. Kenneth Quinones

The main US delegation would stay in Geneva at a well known top class hotel but, by prior agreement, I would check into a small out of the way hotel in Geneva so that I could meet with DPRK officials separately when authorized, to avoid attracting the international press' attention. The hotel selected for me by the US Mission in Geneva turned out to be ideal. It was in Geneva's northeast side not far from the train station, out of the way and certainly a place no journalist would expect to find a US government official to be staying.

Before leaving for Geneva, I had sent a memorandum to my superiors on the delegation telling them of Pyongyang's threat to pull out of the talks and the telephone number of the hotel where I would be staying. I also said I would be meeting Ho Jong to discuss the matter and would report subsequently.

Ambassador Ho Jong and his colleague Li Yong Ho met me at a chocolate shop not far from my hotel. Li was there to impress upon the urgency of the situation. He said Kang Sok-ju was under orders to pull out of the talks unless President Clinton apologized for his alleged "threat" to North Korea. I made it adamantly clear that no threat had been made and that the president certainly had no reason to apologize for stating US policy. I apologized, however, but not for the US president or US policy. I apologized for not being able to clarify US policy further and promised to do my best after the talks to provide the DPRK Mission in New York with copies of US official policy as stated in "press guidance" issued daily for use by the US Department of State Spokesman during his daily briefing of the press. Li said he would inform Kang Sok-ju but would have to tell me later whether the talks could resume. After some cordial chatter over a cup of hot chocolate we parted company with the expectation that the talks would resume as schedule.

The next day we again met to finalize details for the talks. The North Koreans surprised me by asking that the talks be shifted back and forth between the US and DPRK missions. Today this sounds like a minor matter but at the time it was very serious business. South Korea would certainly be very unhappy to have American officials conducting closed talks inside the DPRK mission about matters that concerned the future of the Korean Peninsula.

But before I could raise the matter with Robert Gallucci and Tom Hubbard, a crisis had to be resolved. The US Mission in Geneva had received an urgent call from the airplane carrying the US delegation to Geneva. A ranking member of the US delegation, the National Security Council representative, had discovered after getting on the airplane that his passport had expired. Legally, he was not eligible to enter Switzerland. A valid visa was unnecessary but a valid passport was required. After discussing the situation with officials at the US Mission, we decided there was need for a special security arrangement that required an embassy car to greet Assistant

Secretary Gallucci and his national security adviser at plane side and bring him to the hotel.

The ploy worked. The Swiss authorities permitted a big black US diplomatic car to enter the airport, drive to plane side and pick up Gallucci and the National Security Adviser Daniel Poneman. Both men were then driven out of the airport without showing their passports. I met them at the hotel and obtained the expired passport which I took directly to the US Mission for re-issuance. Poneman paid without complaint the extra charge for the expeditious issuance of his new passport.

Only then was I able to brief Gallucci about the other crisis. As usual, he reacted calmly, obviously confident that the North Koreans had not come all the way to Geneva only to possibly embarrass themselves in front of the international press by pulling out of the talks because of such a flimsy pretext. Gallucci's assessment proved correct.

Then there was the matter of shifting the talks back and forth between the two diplomatic missions. After consulting with Washington, Gallucci was authorized to proceed with the switch. This time the North Koreans bought me hot chocolate at the same little shop. I explained that shifting the talks back and forth would be possible, but only if the North Koreans stayed to engage in the second round. Obviously having the US delegation go to their mission was very important to Pyongyang. Without further ado, Li said Pyongyang had authorized continuation of the talks. He and Ho could not stop smiling after I told them that the talks would begin the first day at the US mission and then shift the second day to the DPRK mission.

Gallucci's negotiating strategy was emerging. He would stand firm on substantive issues such as pressing North Korea to remain in the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and compliance with international inspections standards. At the same time, however, he was willing to concede on what he perceived to be relatively minor atmospheric matters such as conducting meetings at the DPRK mission.

I was also learning how to deal with the North Koreans. They seemed to enjoy bartering, just like so many Koreans I had dealt with in South Korea, especially South Gate (Namdaemun) Market. Achieving a mutually agreeable compromise was important to avoid the appearance that one side had won and the other lost. Also it was extremely important to avoid any word or deed that asserted US supremacy. North Koreans, again like all Koreans, want to be treated as equals, not as being inferior to Americans. I could concede these points to the North Koreans without any sense of giving up anything important. I also treated North Korean diplomats the same way I treated diplomats from any nation – as the representatives of a sovereign nation.

I always sought ways to give my North Korean counterparts something to avoid the appearance that they had lost to a mighty adversary – the United States. I slammed the door shut on any possibility of the US president apologizing for his statements, but I apologized for my inability to keep the North Koreans better informed about US policy. I urged Gallucci to accept the North Korean invitation to meet at their mission, to invite the North Koreans to a wine and cheese party after the talks, and to host

lunch for Kang Sok-ju to facilitate informal discussions while forging a solid professional relationship.

Some may think all of this trivial, but Seoul and Pyongyang did not. Such matters are usually referred to by negotiators as being “atmospherics,” but improving the “atmospherics” between the United States and North Korea was vital given their long legacy of mutual distrust, even mutual hatred. Our goal was to further US interests by improving prospects for achieving a diplomatic settlement. Ultimately the effort achieved the desired results, at least from Washington’s perspective.

But the US-DPRK back and forth diplomacy angered Seoul. President Kim Yong-sam was never able to determine whether his priority was to see a peaceful end to North Korea’s nuclear program or to prevent a warming of relations between Washington and Pyongyang. First there had been the joint statement, then the “New York channel” and now American diplomats visiting a DPRK diplomatic mission. President Kim Yong-sam felt the United States was being too easy on North Korea and eroding his ability to deal assertively with Pyongyang. Hubbard, who served as the US delegation’s primary point of contact with Seoul, politely but firmly reminded Seoul that it had pressed the United States to engage in diplomatic talks with Pyongyang. In other words, the United States was only acting as its ally South Korea had desired. Eventually, however, Seoul and Washington would part company as the United States and North Korea moved toward an eventual agreement.

Japan’s reaction was generally supportive. Tokyo’s priority, like most other nations, was the achievement of a peaceful diplomatic end to North Korea’s nuclear program. Tokyo subsequently demonstrated consistent support of the US handling of the talks with Pyongyang. Gallucci also kept the ambassadors to all UN Security Council members – including Russia and China - fully informed about the US-DPRK talks. Only the South Korean government expressed dissatisfaction of the US handling of the negotiations.

C. Kenneth Quinones  
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