

VOA Note #22

DATE: February 15-25, 1994

PLACE: New York

Event: The “Agreed Conclusions”

Participants: DPRK Ambassador Ho Jong, UN Mission Official Han Song-ryol, US State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs (EAP/) DASThomas Hubbard, Assistant to Politico-Military Affairs Assistant Secretary Gary Samore and North Korea Affairs Officer C. Kenneth Quinones

Early in January 1994, North Korea agreed to resume talks with the IAEA regarding the resumption of limited inspections at Yongbyon hoping this would allow US-DPRK nuclear negotiations to begin again. But Washington, because of Seoul’s insistence, refused to return to the negotiating table pending the resumption of South-North dialogue. To break this impasse, EAP/DAS Hubbard agreed to engage DPRK Ambassador Ho Jong in New York about ways to restart the dialogue. These “New York Channel” talks forged the so-called “Agreed Conclusions” of February 1994. Accompanying Hubbard in these talks with Ho Jong and his recently arrived DPRK Political Minister Han Song-ryol were Gary Samore, special assistant to chief US negotiator Robert Gallucci and I as the North Korea Affairs officer.

These negotiations established several precedents that North Korea continues to assert in the Six Party Talks between China, the USA, Russia, the two Koreas and Japan regarding the same issue: North Korea’s nuclear program. Intense negotiations in early 1994 over how to circumspect mutual mistrust produced agreement on the concept of “simultaneous steps.” “Simultaneous steps,” used now in the Six Party Talks, means that the United States and North Korea would implement at the same time mutually agreed upon and equivalent concessions. Also used for the first time at the February 1994 talks was the term “step for step,” and “action for action,” both phrases still used at the Six Party Talks.

The goal at the “Agreed Conclusions” of 1994 was to establish mutual agreement on “simultaneous” “step for step” and “action for action” that would allow the US-DPRK nuclear negotiations to resume. Essentially both sides agreed to restart their nuclear negotiations once:

- North Korea hosted a limited IAEA inspection at the beginning of March 1994 to satisfy Washington insistence that the IAEA needed to conduct such an inspection to verify that North Korea was maintaining “full scope nuclear safeguards” as promised in the joint statement of June 11, 1993.
- Once the IAEA confirmed that such a satisfactory inspection had been conducted, South-North dialogue would resume at Panmunjom which would
- Allow Washington and Seoul to simultaneously announce the resumption of US-DPRK nuclear negotiations.

The agreement, however, proved too complex to implement successfully. Success would have required the unprecedented cooperation of South and North Korea, the United States and the IAEA.

Lurking in the background to the “conclusions” implementation was the beginning of the massive annual US-South Korea military exercise “Team Spirit.” North Korea

had long considered the exercise a threat to its national security and demanded that the exercise cease. Pyongyang had included as one of the conditions for ending its nuclear program the end of “Team Spirit.” The US Defense Department’s refusal to do so greatly complicated the nuclear negotiations. Implementation of the “Agreed Conclusions” was timed to be completed prior to the annual exercise’s commencement at the end of March.

At the same time, South Korean President Kim Jong-sam remained highly suspicious of both North Korea and the US State Department. He feared that bilateral US-North Korea relations were warming unnecessarily and might eventually undercut US-South Korea relations. He vacillated between encouraging the talks to go forward and impeding their progress by imposing disruptive demands on the US negotiators.

Nevertheless, implementation of the highly complex “Agreed Conclusions” was attempt against this tense backdrop. A single minor misstep at any time could undermine the entire agreement. In fact, from the beginning, fumbling on all sides began to impede smooth implementation. Poor preparation by North Korean technicians at the Yongbyon nuclear research center delayed and complicated the IAEA inspectors’ efforts to conduct an inspection. There was disagreement between the inspectors and the North Korean technicians over what exactly could or could not be done during the inspection. Meanwhile large numbers of US troops and material began to pour into South Korea in preparation for “Team Spirit,” making the North Korean military, which controlled access to Yongbyon, increasingly nervous. Still representatives from Seoul and Pyongyang met in Panmunjom on March 12 to prepare for the resumption of South-North Korea dialogue.

But then the IAEA announced on March 16 that its inspectors had not been able to carry out all the steps they deemed necessary to conduct a legitimate inspection. The State Department spokesman promptly announced that the resumption of US-North Korea nuclear talks appeared “doubtful.”

The “*coup de grace*” for the “Agreed Conclusions” occurred on March 19. That day representatives from the two Koreas again met at Panmunjom with the expectation of nailing down procedures for the re-opening of formal dialogue. Surprisingly, the South Korean government allowed the proceedings to be telecast live on television throughout South Korea, a most peculiar event. Precisely what happened remains unclear. North Korea claims that the South Korean delegate summarily rejected the North Korean proposal although Pyongyang had dropped all preconditions and reportedly accepted all of Seoul’s terms. The South Korean government at that time claimed that the North Korean delegate, without provocation, warned that Seoul would be “turned into a sea of flames” if dialogue did not resume.

Whatever the exact cause of the talk’s rupture, its consequences were immediately clear. The “Agreed Conclusions” became history never to be carried out, South-North Korean dialogue would not resume nor would the US-North Korea nuclear negotiations.

Tensions then quickly escalated. On March 22 the IAEA Board of Governors declared that North Korea was not in compliance with its promise to maintain full scope nuclear safeguards. The next day the United States briefed representatives of

the Permanent Five Member nations of the UN Security Council, explaining that it might be necessary for the United States to press for UN economic sanctions against North Korea. As this was happening, the US military delivered the first of many Patriot anti-aircraft and anti-ballistic missiles to South Korea.

At the State Department, those of us most directly involved with the nuclear negotiations concluded that “a train wreck” was about to occur, i.e. the United States and North Korea were about to smash headline into each other. Unfortunately, we were correct.

C. Kenneth Quinones

December 12, 2008