

VOA Note #23

DATE: May-June, 1994

PLACE: Washington, DC and Pyongyang

Event: The Carter Visit to Pyongyang

Participants: Former President Carter and his wife Rosaline, DPRK leader Kim Il Sung and members of the US Nuclear Negotiating Team.

Failure of the “Agreed Conclusions” set the stage for a second Korean War. The Clinton Administration, under considerable pressure from Seoul, shifted from a posture of negotiation and compromise to one of confrontation and reliance on coercive tactics. The mutual trust that the two chief negotiators Robert Gallucci and Kang Sok-ju had established in their talks was destroyed by directions from higher ranking officials. The negotiator became mere messengers who exchanged increasingly confrontational messages via fax. The only agreement between Washington and Pyongyang was that each would match the other side’s increasingly rigid and confrontational stance with greater rigidity and assertiveness.

When the United States announced that it was considering asking the United Nations to impose economic sanctions on North Korea, Pyongyang responded angrily by declaring that it would consider such a move to be “an act of war.” Then the North Korean army announced on April 28 that it considered the Korean War Armistice to be invalid. At the same time, the joint US-South Korea annual military exercise involving over 600,000 armed military personnel and massive numbers of aircraft, artillery and armored vehicles, was nearing its climax. North Korea also was conducting its largest annual military exercise. In other words, both sides were already fully mobilized and prepared to go to war. The situation reminded some of us at the Department of State about the book that President John F. Kennedy had read on the eve of the Cuban Missile Crisis many years previously, the *Guns of August* about how the German and French armies were also prepared in 1914 to ignite World War I.

Pyongyang nevertheless chose to heightened tensions further in early May by beginning to remove spent nuclear fuel from its reactor as a prelude to possibly reprocessing the fuel into weapons grade plutonium for nuclear weapons. “New York Channel” discussions failed to convince Pyongyang to halt the process, but at least Kang Sok-ju was able to convince his superiors to allow the IAEA to visit Yongbyon to observe the removal of the spent fuel. This at least enabled Washington to receive a trickle of reliable information about what was happening in North Korea and whether Pyongyang was actually preparing to make more plutonium.

Meanwhile, tempers flared in Washington and Seoul. So-called hard liners were demanding that the US take decisive action such as bombing the reactor at Yongbyon, or even invading North Korea. Fortunately for all, cooler heads prevailed in both capitals. Washington at least decided to display restraint toward Pyongyang in the hope that it would reciprocate. By late May the situation had stabilized but remained highly volatile.

At this point former President Carter decided to act on North Korea’s long standing invitation for him to visit Pyongyang. At the beginning of June he called President Clinton, who was in France, to ask for State Department support for his planned trip. President Clinton reluctantly conceded to Carter’s adamant desire to go to North

Korea, but Clinton emphasized that the trip must only be a fact finding mission and under no circumstances should there be any negotiations. Carter, his wife and Carter Center adviser and former US Ambassador Marion Creekmore then visited the State Department to meet with US chief negotiator Assistant Secretary Gallucci. Several members of the US negotiating team joined Gallucci. At the end of the briefing, I asked Carter how he had arranged for visas. My question stunned the Carters. No one had thought about visas where upon I was directed to assist in arranging the appropriate travel documents for the Carter team.

Carter had a very low opinion of the State Department in general and saw no need for any US diplomat to accompany him. He emphasized that the only note taker he trusted and would allow to join him in talks with North Korea's top officials would be his wife Rosaline. But then I was invited to join the group. The National Security Council, however, quickly decided that the North Koreans might misunderstand my presence as indicating a US willingness to engage in negotiations. Instead, another Foreign Service officer who spoke Korean but had not been involved in the nuclear negotiations – at the time he was serving in the US Consulate on Okinawa - was selected to go with Carter.

History has accurately recorded much about Carter's very successful visit to Pyongyang. Still misunderstood, however, is the precise role that Carter played in dissolving the impasse between the US and North Korea which defused tensions and allowed the nuclear talks to resume. It would appear that Carter's stature as a former US president and his willingness to visit North Korea gave Kim Il Sung the pretext to "blink" in the face of the United State's formidable confrontational stance.

No national leader can risk appearing to bow to another nation's pressure without risking criticism of treason and appeasement. But Carter's visit allowed Kim Il Sung to claim victory, at least in the eyes of North Korea's military. Instead of appearing to bow to Washington, Kim Il Sung appeared to compel Washington to come to him. This was sufficient to allow Kim to reciprocate by asking Carter to convey Kim's willingness to accept Washington's demands in exchange for Washington's promise to return to the negotiating table.

Kim's offer could not have been better timed. The day that Carter called the White House to explain to President Clinton what Kim Il Sung was offering was the same day that the US president and his National Security team were deciding whether to dispatch 50,000 US troops to South Korea.

When Carter was finally able to contact the White House from Pyongyang, Clinton refused to take the call. Remember, he had insisted that Carter not engage in any negotiations. Carter instead called the CNN cable television headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia where he was well known and respected. Quickly a live interview was arranged. This got the White House's attention. Clinton immediately had his staff tell CNN to tell Carter to disengage from the interview and to call the White House. Only then was Carter able to explain that he had not engaged in negotiations but rather was merely relying Kim Il Sung's offer to accept US demands and to return to the negotiating table.

Fortunately for everyone, particularly the people of both Koreas, a second Korean War was avoided and the stage set for the resumption of the US-North Korea nuclear negotiations.

C. Kenneth Quinones
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