

VOA Note #6

DATE: March 11, 1993
PLACE: Department of State
Event #6 North Korea Announces Intention to Withdraw
From the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear
Weapons (NPT)

The evening of March 10, 1993 seemed normal until I received a telephone call at home from a Japanese correspondent assigned to Washington, D.C. He informed me that North Korea had announced in a Foreign Ministry statement its intention to leave the NPT. Pyongyang alleged that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was acting in a biased (partial) manner against the DPRK and was attempting to infringe on the DPRK's "sovereignty" by calling for an unprecedented "special inspection" of the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center. North Korea had designated the center a "top secret military installation" and said it would not be open for further inspection. In light of these developments, Pyongyang had determined to preserve its sovereignty by withdrawing from the NPT after the mandatory 90 day waiting period had ended on June 11, 1993.

This event changed my life. Never before nor since have I worked so hard as I had to from March 11, 1993 until July 1996. The next day I took the usual Metro bus from Reston, VA where I lived to the West Falls Church metro stop on the Orange line. My last minutes of calm quiet were the few minutes it took from me to walk from the Foggy Bottom metro stop to the Department of State. The calm was shattered as soon as I entered my small office on the fourth floor in the Office of Korea Affairs section of the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP/K).

As the North Korea "desk" officer, one of my primary responsibilities was to draft and clear with numerous offices in the Departments of State and Defense, as well as the White House. Waiting for me was the EAP Bureau's press officer Ken Bailless. Either he or his supervisor Emmy Yamaguchi each morning assigned me 3 to 5 questions they believed journalists were likely to ask at the State Department's daily noon press briefing. I would discuss the question with them, then by 9 A.M. draft concise answers which I first cleared with office's deputy director and director. I then ran up to the 5th floor to a secure fax machine in the EAP bureau "front office" and sent the approved drafts to several offices in the White House and Defense Department with directions that they respond to me via secure fax or secure telephone by 9:45 AM. By 10 AM I returned to the EAP/K director for his final approval, then dashed upstairs again to the EAP "front office" for approval by the EAP deputy secretary and the Assistant Secretary. While waiting for their comments, I delivered a copy of the guidance to "P" the Undersecretary for Political Affairs who ranked number 3 in the State Department. By 11:00 AM I had to deliver the "cleared" press guidance to the State Department's spokesman who ranked just beneath "P."

The event also changed the US government. Until March 11, 1993, most offices of the US government focused on dealing with the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse and the end of the Cold War. North Korea's announcement abruptly jerked attention away from Europe to East Asia. Also, the many so-called "Soviet experts" who had failed to predict the Soviet Union's demise suddenly discovered a new career – nuclear non-proliferation. Lacking any expertise in Asia, having never visited Asia

much less worked with Asians, these self-proclaimed “non-proliferation experts” declared themselves best prepared to deal with the situation. This incited factionalism within the US government between so-called “non-proliferation experts” and “East Asia experts.” Eventually the “non-proliferation experts” won and assumed responsibility for formulating policy toward North Korea which had become foreign policy problem number one because of the potential for global nuclear proliferation.

On March 11, 1993, the entire US government in Washington, DC went insane because of North Korea’s announcement. The impact was global. No nation had ever considered withdrawing from the NPT. People throughout the US government feared that if North Korea withdrew, other nations would follow and nuclear proliferation would spread like a wild fire around the world.

No sooner had I finished with my press guidance chore than I began reaching telephone calls from throughout the US government, numerous foreign embassies (including the Japanese, Russian, even Israeli embassies), journalists and the New York Stock Exchange and many private businesses. Every one wanted to know:

1. Would there be war (answer – No!)
2. What would the USA do (US would consult with its allies and coordinate with them).
3. Would the USA be willing to negotiate with North Korea to keep it in the NPT? (This was one option under consideration).

The Carter Center called to find out if the US government wanted former President Carter to intervene (No, not now).

The South Korean embassy sent a delegation to the State Department to call on the Assistant Secretary, Korea Affairs Director and the North Korea Affairs officer. The question was: What will the US do? Our answer – what does Seoul recommend?

For the next week I usually got home around 10:30 PM. I would take the metro to West Falls Church where my wife had to pick me up and take me to Reston. Fortunately it was spring and snow did not threaten to close the roads.

Between drafting and clearing press guidance, drafting information memoranda for the Secretary of State on the situation, attending meetings to review policy options, I answered the unending stream of calls from foreign governments.

One week after the announcement, I began regular briefings for representatives from concerned embassies including Russia, South Korea, Japan, Israel, France, UK, Germany, Italy, even Hungary showed up.

EAP/K director initiated afternoon “brainstorming” sessions to discuss the best policy approach for dealing with North Korea. These meetings began with less than 10 people attending and when they ended three years later, the meetings had become morning sessions with 30 or more people attending and chaired by the Assistant Secretary of State for Political Military Affairs Robert Gallucci.

In March 1993, the Office of Korea Affairs had two supervisors (director and his deputy), two political officers for South Korea, two economic officers for South

Korea and one officer for North Korea. By 2008, the office staff had grown to more than 25 officers, most of whom were devoted to North Korea. I was replaced by five officers when I left the position of North Korea Affairs officer.

In March 1993 no one in the US government, including myself, was authorized to contact the DPRK government or its representatives in New York. Instead we had to rely on “go-betweens,” trusted private citizens who carried messages back and forth between the State Department and North Korea’s UN mission. This made it even more difficult to deal with the very tense situation because we had so little accurate information about North Korea and its intentions.

Within a few days, US policy options had been reduced to two: 1. Bomb North Korea’s nuclear facilities as Israel had done to Iraq’s nuclear reactor, or engage North Korea in negotiations. Support for option one was based in the Pentagon, but it was strongly opposed in the National Security Council and at the State Department. At the same time, however, many in the White House, Pentagon and State Department opposed negotiating with North Korea. The concern was that it would encourage North Korea to make repeated threats in the hope of compelling the US to make concessions to it.

At the time, the recently elected Kim Yong-sam administration opposed both bombing and negotiation, and had no other options in mind.

Japan expressed its support for what ever course the US decided to follow, Tokyo’s traditional position.

China demonstrated little interest in the problem.

Russia offered to mediate but the Clinton administration did not want to appear to be dependent on Moscow for help.

As for President Clinton, we was preoccupied with settling into the White House and was still focused on domestic problems, not international issues.

Tony Lake, the National Security Advisor, seemed unable to make any decisions. His predecessor retired Air Force General Brent Scowcroft that been decisive but Lake proved to be very academic in his approach. Before making any decisions, he wanted to study the situation. Timing was running out, however, because the 90 day waiting period was rushing toward an end – June 11, 1993.

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September 2008