

VOA Note #8

DATE: May 12, 1993
PLACE: UN Headquarters Building, New York
EVENT: Meeting between State Department (DOS) and DPRK officials
To discuss possibility of bilateral US-DPRK Negotiations
Regarding North Korea's intended withdrawal from the NPT
PRESENT: Charles Kartman, Director of Office of Korea Affairs, DOS
C. Kenneth Quinones, North Korea Affairs Officer, EAP/K-DOS
Kim Su-Man, DPRK Ambassador assigned to the DPRK Mission
to the United Nations
DPRK interpreter

Chuck Kartman and I caught the early Delta Shuttle flight from Washington, DC to New York's LaGuardia airport for a late morning meeting with DPRK officials. Our instructions were to find out precisely what the North Koreans wanted. The day before DPRK Amb. Ho Jong had said that his government was willing to engage in direct bilateral negotiations regarding North Korea's intended withdrawal from the NPT. In short, our job was to listen and to ask questions, not to negotiate anything.

First we checked in with the US Mission to the UN, then located across the street from the UN Headquarters, to find out if Washington had sent any late instructions. At the time, the State Department's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP) had primary responsibility for dealing with North Korea. Naturally all decisions had to be approved by the Secretary of State, National Security Council with the concurrence of the Department of Defense.

We had agreed to meet our North Korean counterparts in the UN Head Quarter's basement. To my surprise, Ambassador Ho Jong did not appear. Instead, DPRK Amb. Kim Su-man was there with an interpreter. Kim was one of five DPRK officials credited to the DPRK's UN Mission as an ambassador. (At the time, South and North Korea were competing with each other to have the largest number of ambassadors assigned to their mission).

Kim, a small, soft spoken man with good English language skills approached us and introduced himself. So far as we knew, Kim was not a career diplomat but a member of the Korean Workers' Party International Affairs Division. This suggested to us that the North Korean government did not consider the meeting an official bilateral one since it had not sent a diplomat to meet with us.

After an exchange of cordial greetings, the four of us entered a large, empty meeting room and the discussion began. Because Kim's English was sufficient, no interpretation was necessary. Kim explained that his government had decided to offer to engage the US government in direct bilateral negotiations regarding North Korea's intended withdrawal from the NPT. He confirmed that Pyongyang would be willing to send a delegation headed by the First Vice Minister of Kang Sok-ju to engage in the negotiations. The brief meeting ended after 15 minutes. It proved to be cordial but inconclusive. Chuck Kartmen promised that I would call Amb. Kim as soon as the US government had decided what to do.

Back at the US Mission to the UN, while I wrote a report of the meeting, Kartman chatted with officials at the State Department.

Several days of intense debate followed in Washington, D.C. between the National Security Council, State and Defense Departments. The South Korean and Japanese governments were briefed about the meeting. The US government was deeply divided. Some argued that engaging North Korea in negotiations would reward it for bad behavior, i.e. secretly trying to develop nuclear weapons, lying to the IAEA, etc. Others countered that negotiation was preferable to war which would cause enormous damage to the interests of the USA, ROK and Japan, and could escalate into a conflict with China. Yet other argued that a “surgical” air strike to destroy the nuclear reactor at Yongbyon would solve the problem.

The US intelligence community (CIA, DIA and State INR) agreed that an air strike on Yongbyon could result in North Korean retaliation against South Korea and could escalate into a war with China.

It was decided that the US government’s priorities were:

1. Preserve the integrity of the NPT as a global deterrence to the spread of nuclear weapons,
2. preserve peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia,
3. diplomatically isolate North Korea for its international misbehavior by rallying international organizations to press it to stay in the NPT.
4. Urge China and Russia to support the US effort to keep North Korea in the NPT.

In other words, the US government would approach the problem as a global one aimed at preserving the NPT and supporting the IAEA. For this reason, it was decided that responsibility for the negotiations would be passed from the East Asia Bureau to the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs (PM). This was also done because at the time the Clinton Administration had yet to appoint a new Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs and because Office of Korea Affairs Director Kartman was scheduled to be transfer to South Korea as Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy in Seoul.

This made me the central figure in arranging for the negotiations with the DPRK since Kartman was preparing to move and his replacement was not scheduled to arrived until August, the position of assistant and deputy assistant secretaries in the EAP bureau would become empty by the end of May, and the PM Assistant Secretary Robert Gallucci was preoccupied with other issues. Making matters worse, the daughter of the South Korea political affairs officer had died and the other officer was suffering from serious mental problems. There was no one in the Office of Korea Affairs to help me. Late May and early June 1993 proved for me to be very hectic.

Japan responded very positively to the US decision. The ROK government’s response was divided. The Foreign Ministry approved but the Blue House was very suspicious of US intentions and from the start tried to control the US approach to North Korea. A member of the South Korean embassy was assigned to know everything I did.

C. Kenneth Quinones – September 2008