

The View From Foggy Bottom

By

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April 12, 2005

In an hour long, private meeting, we reviewed the current state of US-DPRK relations and looked into the future regarding US policy toward the nations of Northeast Asia, specifically the two Koreas, China and Japan.

The reports of my two previous most recent meetings with DPRK Ambassador Han Song-ryol had received close, high level review. On April 11, the report of the April 4 meeting was review with the new Assistant Secretary, his coordinator for North Korean issues and the director of the Office of Korea Affairs. The report was deemed very valuable, timely, and impressively detailed.

The EAP bureau has decided it will act as soon as possible to reopen diplomatic dialogue with DPRK Ambassador Han. Advancing the proposal upward to the Secretary of State will take some time and caution. The Secretary prefers to maintain the Administration present rigid position. The EAP Bureau's top level, however, believes now is the appropriate time to resume substantive diplomatic dialogue via the "New York" channel. But first the new Assistant Secretary must establish a solid working relationship with the Secretary and her immediate subordinates. Also, he must broaden support at NSC for acceptance of a new proposal.

I was invited to advice on how best to re-engage the North Koreans in New York. The meetings in December 2004 had not gone well. Ambassador Park Gil-yon had appeared to be very stiff and formal. Ambassador Han appeared very uncomfortable and frustrated. At times he seemed anxious to speak but avoided doing so.

The EAP Bureau's senior staff has decided to follow the precedents I had established for engaging the North Koreans. I cautioned that the DPRK officials are less concerned about individual rank and more sensitive about having their area of responsibility respected. I emphasized that Ambassador Park's primary responsibility is to engage UN issues. Han's job is to maintain liaison with the US government and the American public. The December meeting should have allowed the North Koreans to designate who they would send to a meeting with the Americans. Apparently State INR had urged that the meeting be with Pak, not Han Song-ryol. Obviously that had backfired.

If and when there is another "New York Channel" meeting, the EAP Director will make the call to Han and suggest a meeting at a restaurant. All previous meetings had been in the DPRK mission's offices. I said this was wrong, Meeting over lunch guaranteed at least one hour of informal discussion. Meeting in an office allowed frequent interruptions by staff and telephone calls.

The meeting should be informal and “personal.” In other words, issues should be explored in an exchange of views. No formal positions should be tabled. Instead, the sessions should aim to educate each side about what might or might not be politically possible in each side’s capital.

My friends at DOS promised they will propose to their superiors at the earliest possible time the resumption of informal dialogue via the New York Channel. Since Han Song-ryol had asked me to deliver a message to the State Department and had asked me to provide a very nice DPRK calendar to EAP/K, I said it would be appropriate to call Han to thank him and to suggest the possibility of a meeting in New York. This would avoid the question of “saving face” and open the way for an informal resumption of dialogue.

My suggestions were all accepted and I was assured they would be acted upon.

INR was criticized as being unhelpful. Its analysis is provided in brief, unconnected essays of one paragraph. Longer assessments lack depth of knowledge. No one has experience dealing with North Koreans nor comprehends how their bureaucracy functions.

EAP/K staff are too loyal to “the system.” Those with experience fear thinking “outside the box” and all lack expertise about Korea related issues and how to deal with Koreans.

Regarding US relations with Northeast Asia, the Bush Administration is now uncomfortable with China’s attitude regarding the Six Party Talks. Apparently Beijing has proposed to Washington an unacceptable solution to the nuclear problem. The Administration now wants to recapture the initiative from Beijing. There apparently is a growing concern that China is asserting too much influence in East Asia.

Current views in EAP favor reasserting prior, long held US policies and strategies. This means improving relations with South Korea and maintaining close ties with Japan. Doing so will convince both allies to lean toward the US and not toward China. It requires that the US reclaim the initiative for resolving the Korean Peninsula’s nuclear issue, but at the same time supporting South Korea’s efforts to pursue reconciliation with North Korea.

As for Japan, its leadership seems to be too willing to lean on the US for protection, prosperity and diplomatic support. Japan’s leadership needs to revitalize itself and begin to more urgently deal with Japan’s economic stagnation, problems of an aging population and complacency with a population that is falling behind South Korea in terms of education, international and technological sophistication.

Pursuit of a strategy to restrain China by supporting the interest of South Korea and Japan is a new form of “containment.” The first priority must be to reorient the Bush Administration from its present sense of unilateral supremacy to a renewed appreciation for the benefits of multilateral cooperation, military, economic and diplomatic.

Toward this end, South Korea needs to understand that “playing a balancing role” between China and the US is a no-win situation. South Korea’s interests are better served by leaning toward the US, but the US must do a better job of retaining Seoul’s allegiance. Similarly, Japan must demonstrate a keener sensitivity toward its neighbors. Japan needs them if it is to revitalize its aging economy.