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Kim Jong Il confronts Bush — and wins. A New Page in North-South Korean Relations

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The leaders of South and North Korea have met. The meeting had been formally delayed since the summer because of serious flooding in the North – but in fact both sides had to wait six years for this opportunity.

The two Korean heads of state met for the first time in June 2000 in Pyongyang. Kim Jong Il, leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), was supposed to reciprocate by visiting Seoul, but he never did. Now he has succeeded in having a South Korean president visit his capital again.

Roh Moo Hyun, president of the Republic of Korea (ROK), agreed because he and his predecessor, Kim Dae Jung, ended decades of tit-for-tat protocol in which both sides sought advantage with endless threats and posturing, and began the so-called "sunshine policy". South Korea, as the 10th-ranking industrial power in the world, has a clear advantage over the North; letting Kim Jong Il think he is in charge is a small price to pay for trying to open up the North. There is political advantage in the summit; Roh, whose popularity is low, can't win in elections in December and wants to boost the chances of his successor.

Roh Moo Hyun (left) and Kim Jong Il

The DPRK has long fancied itself capable of manipulating the ROK's politics, and perhaps it has some influence for there is a change in Southern opinion about the North that is part of the policy of reconciliation since 1998. Southerners, used to propaganda depicting the communists as evil sadists, now see them as long-lost cousins ruled by errant (and perhaps nutty) uncles. The summit capped that extraordinary achievement. Roh has also promoted the idea of the Korean peninsula as the hub of a vibrant northeast Asian economy and wants "the era of the Northern economy" as his legacy.

But the real basis for the summit lies in the entirely unexpected warming of relations between President George W Bush and Kim Jong Il, manifest in the 13 February agreement on denuclearisation, the origins of which remain murky. Pyongyang celebrated United States Independence Day last year by firing seven missiles, including a long-range Taepodong 2 and several medium-range rockets, and followed that up in October with its first nuclear test. This led to UN sanctions supported for the first time by the DPRK's old allies, Russia and China (1).

Taepodong 2

Bush does not "reward bad behaviour". He had always rejected direct talks with North Korea and had included the North in his "axis of evil". Vice-President Dick Cheney said in 2004: "We don't negotiate with evil, we defeat it." Yet the February agreement was hammered out in secret direct talks between Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill and Foreign Minister Kim Gye-gwan in Beijing and Berlin, and was then presented to the multilateral Six Party Talks (the two Koreas, China, the US, Japan and Russia) on North Korea's nuclear

programme set up two years ago.
Back to the future

The "back to the future" quality of this agreement can be appreciated in the list of achievements: mothballing and dismantling the North's plutonium reactors, relaxing sanctions and embargoes Washington has had against the North for decades, taking it off the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism, readmitting UN nuclear inspectors, getting a peace agreement to end the Korean war, and moving toward normalisation of relations.

All of these were accomplished or being negotiated when Bush came into office. But the Clinton administration had also worked out a plan to buy out, indirectly, the North's medium and long-range missiles; it was ready to be signed in 2000 but Bush let it fall by the wayside and today the North retains all its formidable missile capability. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was amazed in her memoirs that Bush let this deal slide into oblivion, since Pyongyang has no other reliable delivery capability for nuclear weapons. Hardly any influential Americans seem to remember these negotiations, although they were major news at the time.

Also inexplicable is how Bush, or Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, short-circuited the squabbling inside their administration over how to handle evildoers. On 19 September 2005 the US and the DPRK came to an agreement at the fourth session of the Six Party Talks on principles that paved the way toward denuclearisation (including a US pledge not to attack or invade the North). Yet three days later the Treasury Department, operating under the disputed USA Patriot Act, sanctioned North Korea for its allegedly illegal dealings with the Banco Delta Asia in Macao, cutting it off from the international financial system. It is now clear that the evidence was skimpy and that the sanctions were specifically designed to destroy the September pledges (2).

The only illegal activity that the Treasury Department uncovered dated to 1994 and the amounts were tiny, $250m in counterfeit notes that DPRK operatives allegedly deposited in Banco Delta. (Insiders said it was really the North's entirely legal gold bullion transactions with this obscure bank that were at issue.) Years passed with almost no critical reporting on the matter, and then administration insiders finally admitted that all this was not about law enforcement: dissident officials had gone after North Korea to head off an accommodation between Washington and Pyongyang (3). The Banco Delta problem quietly disappeared when the US agreed to return all the DPRK's seized deposits with no questions asked and no penalty.

A prominent expert, Leon V Sigal, has argued that it takes a while for new administrations, Republican or Democratic, to realise that they have to deal with North Korea, and that with the February agreement, Bush "put the United States firmly back on the road to reconciliation with North Korea". The key US negotiator, Hill, was similarly optimistic; in August he said that he expects a full declaration of all nuclear weapons and programmes from the North by the end of this year, and full dismantlement of all facilities in 2008. He hinted that Rice might visit Pyongyang soon, and Washington gossip hints at a summit between Bush and Kim Jong Il. If so, it is all to the good. But no administration ever took longer to arrive at such a conclusion.

A failed policy

Until the February agreement, Bush had presided over the most asinine Korea policy in history. He sent James Kelly to Pyongyang in October 2002 to accuse the North Koreans of harbouring a second nuclear programme utilising highly-enriched uranium (HEU). Immediately after, Bush broke the precious 1994 Framework Agreement, which had kept the North's Yongbyon plutonium complex frozen for eight years (4). The North reacted by leaving the Non-Proliferation Treaty, taking back the plutonium complex complete with 8,000 fuel rods that had been neutered in concrete casks, manufacturing an unknown number of nuclear weapons – and facing no penalties other than a slap on the wrist.

Washington's inaction in 2002-03 was partly caused by internal conflict over what to do about the DPRK's provocative steps. Like the current crisis over Iran's HEU facilities, some officials (especially those in Cheney's entourage) urged a bombing campaign. Others argued that this would start another Korean war. Bush was focused on making war against Iraq, not the DPRK. So nothing was done except to complain to Seoul that the Bush administration didn't understand its sunshine policy, thus creating problems with both Koreas.

The 1994 agreement said nothing about HEU but most experts thought the North had indeed cheated by dealing with Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan. This wasn't news: the Clinton administration had told the Bush transition team about it in 2000 and suggested that it should be no obstacle to keeping Yongbyun frozen and finishing the missile deal, because HEU is a hard technology to master and would require many years of experimentation before a bomb could be built (5). No one is surprised if North Korea cheats. But the 1994 agreement and the missile deal were based on painstaking verification measures that assured no plutonium bombs and no missile delivery vehicles.

The Bush administration sat on the intelligence information that Clinton provided for nearly two years, and then sent Kelly to Pyongyang to confront the North Koreans with it. Yet if American negotiators learned anything in the 1990s, it is that you do not confront the North Koreans. Kelly, who returned to Washington empty-handed. Kelly's timing was also absurdly provocative: he delivered his message on the heels of Bush's preemptive strike doctrine, announced in September 2002 and targeted at the "axis of evil." A few months later came the preventive war against Iraq. Pyongyang reasoned that the US would not have invaded if Saddam had nukes, concluding: "This is not going to happen to us." The Koreans soon found myriad ways of talking about their "nuclear deterrent." Meanwhile George W. Bush did nothing about the HEU technology imports that he alleged to be a bomb program (why would they need both HEU and plutonium bombs?), or about the staggering ineptitude that fractured the 1994 Framework Agreement—no real penalties, and no plan for ending either program, or about the nukes that the North manufactured after getting their facilities back.

We now know that U.S. intelligence on the North's HEU was no better on than it was on Saddam Hussein's WMDs, but it took five years to find that out. In the immediate aftermath of the February 13th agreement Joseph DeTrani, a longtime intelligence official, informed a Senate committee that intelligence agencies now pegged reports of the North's HEU weapons program at only "the mid-confidence level," jargon for information that can be interpreted in various ways, or isn't fully corroborated. Like Iraq, Pyongyang had also purchased thousands of aluminum tubes: but it turned out that these tubes weren't strong enough to use in the high-speed rotors necessary for centrifuges. Evidence of these modest purchases had been transformed by Washington analysts into "a significant production capability" in 2002; since that time, however, the U.S. had turned up no evidence of the "large-scale procurements" that would be necessary for an HEU bomb program. Other officials said the degree of the North's progress toward an HEU program was unknown; they did import some centrifuges from Pakistan—a mere twenty of them, as it turned out, when thousands are needed for production purposes—but no one knew what had happened since: so now the intelligence consensus had turned into "the HEU riddle".

A-bomb mysteries

The bomb that the DPRK detonated last year was made of plutonium, not HEU – it is Bush's bomb, not Clinton's. Still, it isn't easy to say why North Korea chose to test a weapon. It has been 15 years since the North achieved the goal of making the world think that it had atomic weapons. In 1992 the CIA estimated that Pyongyang probably had one or two bombs, and it stuck to that estimate for a decade. The ambiguity about whether they did or didn't have the bomb strengthened the North's hand: as with Israel, probable possession of nukes, but no test and no announcement, creates a credible deterrent without putting overwhelming political pressure on other states in

the region to follow suit.

Why did North Korea end that ambiguity for no obvious gain? It may be that the test was directed more against China, which shut off petroleum exports to the North last September in response to the July missile tests. In that case Pyongyang would have tested to show that it could not be intimidated, and only afterwards agreed to return to the Six Party talks.

Nor is it easy to say why Bush decided to make a deal with the North. Clearly the congressional elections last year ended Bush's hopes of a long-term Republican ascendancy, and turned him into the lamest of lame ducks. His core of support has evaporated at home and abroad: most of the neo-conservatives (Paul Wolfowitz, John Bolton) are gone, as are Tony Blair and Abe Shinzo.

Yet these explanations are not entirely convincing. In 2003-04 the North Koreans seemed genuinely afraid that the US would attack them. But the US military was soon stretched so thin around the world that the Pentagon could barely spare a handful of combat brigades for the Korean theatre (extant war plans call for half a million US troops there before a victory can be assured). Pyongyang's strategy was to become a declared nuclear power, suffer through sanctions for the next two years, and then hope to deal with the next US president.

Something happened in Washington, as Christopher Hill got a free hand to deal with Pyongyang. The most likely explanation is that the White House decided that Iran was the greater threat: if a deal could be struck with North Korea, that would put pressure on Tehran to negotiate away its nuclear programme. If Bush decided to use force against Iran, North Korea would have to be neutralised or forgotten.

These last years, relations between Washington and Seoul have deteriorated drastically. By commission and omission, Bush trampled on the norms of the historic US relationship with Seoul while creating a dangerous situation with Pyongyang. Perhaps the "back to the future" somersault will begin to repair this damage; when the Bush administration returned to Bill Clinton's strategy of engaging the North, South Korean public opinion against the US began to soften.

In South Korea anti-Americanism was never anything like the Middle East's broad rejection of US power, culture, and values. But since 2001 the US image has deteriorated, especially among the young. Koreans, like many others around the world, were angry about Bush. From being overwhelmingly in favour of the US before Bush, public opinion is now divided: according to the polls 43% do not favour the US, and among Koreans in their 20s only 22% have any kind of favourable opinion (6).

Consternation in the South

This is the result of Washington's policies toward the North, and fears for South Korea's sunshine policy and reconciliation with the North (from which Washington under Bush disassociated itself). The acute danger, which South Korean leaders immediately grasped, was that the Bush doctrine – under which the US may pre-emptively attack regimes it does not like – meant that Seoul would be dragged into a war it didn't want. Soon after the doctrine became public, a close adviser to Roh told Bush administration officials that if the US attacked the North over South Korean objections, it would destroy the alliance with the South. Leaders in Seoul repeatedly sought assurances from Washington that the North would not be attacked without close consultations or over Seoul's veto. The Roh administration has not won these assurances. Since the North can destroy Seoul in a matter of hours with 10,000 guns buried in the mountains north of the capital, one can imagine the extreme consternation that the Bush doctrine caused in Seoul.

Things are so bad that it now requires a major effort to restore trust and confidence. What the US could do to start afresh would be finally to normalise relations with the North (as it pledged to do in 1994 and again in 2005); guarantee Seoul that it will have a veto over the use of military force against Pyongyang; assure Seoul that the US will not use its forces in Korea in a conflict over Taiwan; and reduce the anachronistic US troop presence in Korea. These steps are not impossible to imagine: the ROK, China and Russia have all urged the US to normalise relations with North Korea, and China gains ever-increasing weight on the peninsula by maintaining good relations with both the North and the South. It is entirely reasonable that the elected leaders of South Korea should have a greater say in whether to go to war on the peninsula than American leaders (except in a far-fetched scenario in which North Korea directly attacked the US), and it is also entirely logical for Seoul to want to remain on the sidelines of any conflict over Taiwan. It is in the American interest to find a better way to deploy its troops in Korea, now in their seventh decade. And perhaps by having an embassy in Pyongyang, Americans would finally gain some leverage over an antagonist that has effectively defied the US for more than sixty years.

The past six years have seen an astonishing spectacle in which an American president zig-zagged from gratuitous insults thrown at the North Korean head of state, to charges of new nuclear programs and money-laundering based on flimsy evidence, installing the North as part of an axis of evil and allowing advisors to make open threats of war against it while doing little if anything as the North kicked out UN inspectors, manufactured nuclear weapons, tested both A-bombs and missiles, showing it would not bend to Washington, Beijing or Moscow. Then suddenly both sides climbed down from their polarized positions and embraced Bill Clinton's decade-old give-and-take diplomacy.

North Korea has won and got what it wanted, and what it had suggested in the 1990s: to trade its nuclear programme for aid and normalised ties with the US, a proposition denied and derided in official Washington.

The successful diplomacy of the late 1990s was led by Kim Dae Jung, who finally convinced Clinton that Pyongyang would give up its nuclear programme and its missiles in return for a new relationship. The US could have its cake and eat it too, Kim Dae Jung thought, because Pyongyang would not object to the continued stationing of US troops in the South if relations were normalised. He judged that Kim Jong Il was almost as worried about the strength of China and Japan (simultaneously strong for the first time in modern history) as he was about the US, and could be coaxed into new security arrangements within the international system that the US had built in northeast Asia since 1945. Washington could lose an enemy and gain a neutral North Korea – if not a friend or an ally – as a counterbalance against China and a revived Russia, and as a check on Japan's future course.

It is likely that Pyongyang hopes to play the US off against China, much as it did Moscow and Beijing during the cold war. There is no way to know if this new thinking has had an impact on Bush, but it is a logical US strategy for the region in the 21st-century.

Bizarre events may well place Bush and "evildoer" Kim Jong Il side by side as peacemakers. If so, all well and good, and better late than never.

NOTES

[1] Russia and China only voted Chapter VII sanctions after making sure that they carried no implication of being backed by military force.

[2] John McGlynn, "Financial Sanctions and North Korea: In Search of the Evidence of Currency Counterfeiting and Money Laundering", *Japan Focus*, 10 July 2007, www.japanfocus.org/products/ details/2463

[3] See "How US Turned North Korean Funds into a Bargaining Chip", *The New York Times*, 11 April 2007.

[4] Bush and his advisers claimed that the North cheated on this agreement, when in fact the eight-year freeze was never broken. UN inspectors were on the ground every day, and all the facilities were sealed and under constant surveillance.

[5] See Selig Harrison, "Did North Korea Cheat?", *Foreign Affairs*, New York, February 2006.

[6] Meredith Woo-Cumings in David I Steinberg, dir, *Korean Attitudes Toward the United States*, M E Sharpe, 2005; Pew Global Attitudes Project.

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