


Dancing with Google DPRK-Style

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Recommended Citation

"Dancing with Google DPRK-Style", NAPSNet Policy Forum, January 16, 2013,
<https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/dancing-with-google-dprk-style/>

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A recently completed private mission to North Korea has been described as “[useful idiots](#)” (John McCain) or at least as “failed” (no agreement to open the DPRK to the Internet or some-such was announced). The Obama Administration publicly disowned the mission as “[unhelpful](#)” even before they hit the ground.

In reality, no-one except the delegation and a few North Koreans know what was said to whom in Pyongyang.

All we know is that they didn't get the arrested American--and that the coincidence of their trip with his incarceration was serendipity, not planned, and therefore incidental or a distraction from the reason to go.

To some commentators, the [propaganda treatment](#) of the “Google mission” (it was in fact a Richardson mission with Google’s Schmidt tagging along, set up by Tony Namkung; the American media got this wrong before the North Korean began to portray as such) as paying “tribute” to the

DPRK's present and past leadership. This portrayal reminded them of the disrespectful treatment of Jimmy Carter on his [second trip](#) to Pyongyang in April 2011.

The public portrayal of this mission to ordinary North Koreans as "tributary" is simply what you would expect at this time, given that the mission apparently didn't bring any serious private "tribute" or the North Koreans didn't want what was on offer or conditions related thereto. If they had, and there was something substantive to announce, then the language might have been moderate, or there might have been less dissonance with the external prop-agit related to the mission. My best guess is that the mission didn't come bearing serious tribute, that is, a Google-funded initiative of substance of the kind that Roger Cavazos and I [outlined](#), and whatever the North Koreans wanted wasn't something Google could deliver.

The timing to go to Pyongyang on an independent mission is almost never good, from the White House's perspective. Ironically, the White House dislikes independent political forces almost as much as Pyongyang distrusts civil society.

But propagit treatment of Americans of any size, shape, or color is epiphenomenal. Its primary significance in this case is that it shows that the North Koreans have almost nothing at stake now in their relationship with Washington to worry about risking with disrespectful prop-agit. treatment.

It's too easy to attribute the US mission members' motivation to Namkung's alleged naivete about the North Koreans (of which, to be blunt, there is zero evidence and much to the contrary), Richardson's craving for publicity, etc. He may well seek the limelight; but he has *not* gone to Pyongyang over the last few years because he judged the timing to be not propitious.

This time, he decided it was time to go--he may have been wrong, but I am sure that there was reason to believe that some productive outcome would occur. Again, this is sheer speculation on my part, but it is not uncommon for one part of the DPRK UN Mission to say one thing, and for another part to say something else; or even for the DPRK UN Mission to say one thing in NY, and later find itself on a limb cut off in PY by someone opposed to engaging the US.

In short, this discussion does not consider many factors that affect how such missions are fielded, and is far too judgmental, too early, as to its true significance based, ironically, on evidence from the least trustworthy of sources—North Korean propagit.

And, we still don't know what was said by whom that could actually be worth knowing. Maybe nothing; maybe something of great significance. And before you go, there is no way to know what you might get. That was the case when Richardson went to request the release of the downed helicopter pilot in '96. I am sure that was the case again this year. It's *always* the case when you go to North Korea.

Given the stakes, especially when no-one in the White House has a plan to seriously engage the North Koreans in ways that might work, you go to talk when the opportunity arises, not when it is optimal.

- [Peter Hayes](#), NAPSNet contributor

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