



Policy Forum 09-025: DPRK Trip Report February 24-28th, 2009



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By Paul Carroll

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I. Introduction

Paul Carroll, Program Director at the Ploughshares Fund, writes, "Depending on how the U.S. responds to any DPRK action, as well as our partners in the region, we may be in for rough stretch of road for some time. The alternative could be that if the responses are creative and bold, we may just be able to snatch some victory from the jaws of defeat and make some progress toward the goals of denuclearizing the peninsula and transforming the regional security situation."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of

views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Article by Paul Carroll

- "DPRK Trip Report February 24-28th, 2009"

By Paul Carroll

I recently had the opportunity to make my second trip to the DPRK. During the last week of February, I accompanied a small delegation from Stanford University led by Professor John Lewis, who has been traveling to North Korea for more than twenty years. Two things are important to note at the outset. First, I am the Program Director at the Ploughshares Fund. Ploughshares supports Lewis' work at Stanford (as well as the Nautilus Institute for that matter) with grants in order to keep lines of communication open with the DPRK government and provide the opportunity for some of the best minds and most experienced U.S. professionals to interact with the North in an unofficial capacity. Lewis generously invited me to tag along with the group as an observer and to witness first-hand the work that he and his colleagues do. Second, though I "cover" the North Korea nuclear issue and manage Ploughshares' grantmaking in this arena I do not consider myself an "expert" on the intricacies of the diplomatic history and current challenges of the impasse.

Nevertheless, few Americans have been to the DPRK and fewer still that have had the opportunity to meet with officials from the Foreign Ministry, military, and other government entities. And for program staff at foundations, nothing substitutes for a bona fide "site visit." I quickly took John up on his offer.

I only had one earlier "data point" - my visit in July 2006 at the very time the DPRK launched a volley of missiles, but before they had tested a nuclear device. After my most recent trip, I must say that I feel more than twice as much understanding, and confusion, as before. We were the fourth in a quick succession of American nongovernmental delegations to visit Pyongyang since the beginning of the year, and from what I understand from people who participated in the earlier trips, there was a fair amount of consistency of "message" from the North.

In general, our sense from the meetings and discussions we had was that the North was skeptical about the degree to which the new Obama Administration represented a significant opportunity at a departure from the past. Our trip coincided almost exactly with Secretary of State Clinton's big Asia swing and though that trip was considered a success from many perspectives, our DPRK interlocutors were displeased with what they heard vis-à-vis their country. There was nothing that they heard to indicate a change from the late Bush era approach. To underscore this, we were surprised and disappointed to learn that we would not be able to visit the Yongbyon nuclear facility, this despite the fact that our team included an unparalleled technical expert who had been there on five previous occasions. Moreover, our expectation that we would meet with the DPRK chief negotiator, Kim Kye Gwan, was not met. We had several audiences with Ambassador Li Gun and Jong Thae Yang, high level officials with the American Affairs bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that were substantive and informative.

Our delegation made several efforts to explain what we believed was a real opportunity at substantial change in diplomatic approach and movement with the new president, but also that domestic limits meant that the North Korea policy team would take a bit of time to be installed. The response was clear - they were not persuaded and at any rate, given the clear nature of "action for action" under the Six Party Agreement they would soon be forced to either suspend or slow down their disablement work at Yongbyon (this seems to have happened as new reports today indicate the North has slowed from a snail's pace of 15 rods a day to a crippled snail's pace of 15 rods a week). They also indicated that their plans to launch a rocket with a satellite was completely within their

rights and was a space program, not a missile test. Again, our response that the world would not grasp such a distinction and the act would be very provocative, was met with stony silence. Even in conversations with representatives from other parts of the government with no direct bearing on foreign policy, the conversations were very constrained and offers of exchanges or possibilities of collaborative projects were met with shrugs of "maybe" and "we'll see."

Now that two weeks have passed since the trip, it seems that we may be poised for a period of increased tension within the Six Party Talks process. The North has made clear its intent to launch a rocket and taken other steps with respect to food aid and North-South relations that put a strain on already delicate relationships. The U.S. has been working to forestall a launch, but should one occur the domestic political pressures on the new president to do something will be tremendous. We have a new designated special envoy, Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, to take up the North Korea challenge within the State Department, but the near-term deck seems stacked against him.

I will not speculate on what the North's motivations or calculus might be to take provocative actions at a time when the future relationship with the other five parties - and particularly the U.S. - could be brighter than at any time in the past fifteen years. But I do expect that we will enter a phase where the current framework will be further undermined. Depending on how the U.S. responds to any DPRK action, as well as our partners in the region, we may be in for rough stretch of road for some time. The alternative could be that if the responses are creative and bold, we may just be able to snatch some victory from the jaws of defeat and make some progress toward the goals of denuclearizing the peninsula and transforming the regional security situation.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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