Policy Forum 98-10: North Korea’s Underground Construction

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Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network

NORTH KOREA'S UNDERGROUND CONSTRUCTION

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The is intended to provide expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia, and an opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis. The Forum is open to all participants of the Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network (NAPSNet) . As always, NAPSNet invites your responses to this report. Please see "NAPSNet Invites Your Responses," below, and send your responses to the NAPSNet Coordinator at: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org .

NORTH KOREA'S UNDERGROUND CONSTRUCTION

Essay by C. Kenneth Quinones

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I. Introduction

The following essay was written by Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones , US Asia Foundation Representative to Korea. Dr. Quinones was formerly North Korean desk officer at the US State Department. The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not represent those of any government or institution.

Quinones argues that the media reports of the construction of an alleged underground nuclear facility in the DPRK are the result of deliberate "leaks" by members of the US intelligence community who wish to influence the debate on US policy toward the DPRK. He points to evidence from his own extensive visits to the DPRK that the DPRK relies heavily on underground facilities for a variety of purposes. He argues that, before jumping to any conclusions, the US should demand an on-site inspection of the facility to determine its actual nature.

II. Essay by C. Kenneth Quinones

"North Korea's 'New' Nuclear Site - Fact or Fiction?" by Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones

1. Introduction

Sensational stories in the American and international press since mid- August have abruptly transformed North Korea from a feeble, impoverished nation on the verge of famine and political collapse into an awesome, secretive, irrational nuclear power. The New York Times on August 17 reported that "Spy satellites have extensively photographed a huge work site 25 miles northeast of Yongbyon," North Korea's nuclear research facility. "Thousands of North Korean workers are

swarming around the new site, burrowing into the mountainside, American officials said," the report continued. "Other intelligence," according to the same story, cites unidentified officials as saying that US intelligence analysts told them "they believed that the North intended to build a new (nuclear) reactor and reprocessing center under the mountain."

The US Department of Defense's denial of the story's accuracy has been largely ignored. The press continues repeating the story without assessing its validity. Stories about North Koreans building secret nuclear facilities sell newspapers; government denials don't. Some people have gone so far as to pervert the government denials to mean that the report is true, arguing that when the US government denies something, the opposite must be the truth.

All of this poses a potentially precarious situation on the Korean peninsula given the pervasive distrust between South and North Korea. In democratic societies like the US and South Korea, public opinion creates pressure on governments to "do something." But acting on incomplete and inaccurate information could lead to tragic mistakes. The unsubstantiated speculation that has appeared in the international press about North Korea's possible nuclear intentions could even lead to war on the Korean peninsula. Before jumping to any conclusions, we had better check the accuracy of these reports.

What facts do we have? No one outside the US, South and North Korean governments have seen or had access to any credible evidence that North Korea is building a new nuclear facility. The US government has officially denied the accuracy of the reports. Apparently a US satellite has photographed a large construction site in North Korea. Beyond this, the purpose of the construction project remains unclear.

Press stories citing "intelligence sources" and "satellite photographs" always make exciting, but not necessarily accurate, reading. Usually "intelligence" leaks come from frustrated people in the US government, either in the executive and legislative branches of government, or both. These "leakers" seem to think they know better than anyone what is best for national security and foreign policy. To influence foreign policy, they give classified "intelligence" to the press, hoping to pressure the White House and State Department into changing policy by exciting public fear and doubt about present policy. Responsible government officials and intelligence analysts do not do this, so the press only has access to the "frustrated" half of the story, not the responsible point of view.

The more important story about North Korea's nuclear program could therefore be behind the headlines. This quiet story is centered in Washington, not in Pyongyang. It involves America's intelligence community and not North Korea's nuclear program. But before we go any further, who am I to discuss such matters?

2. Life North of the Border

As a former US diplomat in the Foreign Service, I was closely involved in US-North Korea relations from 1992 to 1997. Between 1992 and 1994, I was the "North Korea desk officer" at the Department of State. I then served on State, Energy and Defense Department delegations sent to North Korea between 1995 and 1997. I frequently met and negotiated with North Koreans, traveled extensively in North Korea, and lived and worked there off and on for seven months. I still meet North Korean government officials at academic conferences, and I plan to visit Pyongyang this fall as the Asia Foundation's representative to Korea.

I first discussed North Korea's nuclear intentions with North Koreans in New York in September 1992 when I met Foreign Minister Kim Yong-nam and then Ambassador at Large Kim Gye-gwan,

now North Korea's chief negotiator with the US. I was the first US diplomat to visit Pyongyang when I went there in 1992. In October 1993, I discussed North Korea's nuclear program over lunch with Kim Il-sung in 1993. I served on the US delegation to the nuclear negotiations with North Korea in New York and Geneva in 1993 and 1994.

In November 1994, only a few days after the US and the DPRK signed the Agreed Framework, I was a member of the first US delegation to visit the DPRK's Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center in November 1994. In January 1995, I took three US Department of Energy scientists to Yongbyon. In the summer of 1995, I negotiated the working arrangements for the US Nuclear Spent Fuel Team which spent the next two and one half years putting North Korea's eight thousand nuclear spent fuel rods in long term, safe storage as required by the Agreed Framework.

Beginning in January 1996, I teamed up with the US Army to negotiate with the Korean People's army. In May 1996, both sides agreed to jointly search for and recover the remains of the more than 8,000 American soldiers who died in North Korea and were left behind during the Korean War. The Department of State sent me to live in Pyongyang in the summers of 1996 and 1997 to help foster cooperation between the US Army and the Korean People's Army.

I learned during my thirteen trips to North Korea and travel in five of its provinces that underground construction is quite normal. North Korea's military leaders, recalling the intense bombing by the United States during the Korean War, are trying to hide and to protect its most important facilities from possible aerial bombardment. Consequently, many factories and most military installations are built underground. There is nothing secret about this.

3. Big Bangs at Yongbyon

While living at the nuclear research center at Yongbyon, North Pyongan Province, in 1995 and 1996, I often heard explosions coming from nearby Yaksan, famous in Korean folklore for its beautiful azaleas in the spring. The explosions were very loud. Each one made me jump with fear. I asked the North Korean workers about the explosions, but, of course, they never heard them. Clearly, the explosions came from inside the mountain. Just across the Kuryong river, only a few hundred meters from where the US Nuclear Spent Fuel Team worked, we could see North Korean laborers and soldiers walking to and from the area. We could also see the growing piles of rock taken from inside the mountain.

Was this the beginning of a new, secret nuclear facility? I think not. Obviously it was not secret since we could hear and see the work, and knew the location. At the time, many new anti-aircraft sites were being built on top of hills around Yongbyon, and many new apartment buildings were being constructed for the families of the increasing number of military personnel moving into the area. North Koreans told me all of this construction was designed to better protect the nuclear facility from possible attack by American Tomahawk missiles and F-15 fighters. I concluded that bombproof shelters were being blasted inside the mountain to make bunkers for anti-aircraft guns and missiles, and to protect ammunition and soldiers.

4. North Korea's Smoking Mountains

During the summers of 1996 and 1997, I traveled on most of the roads in the southern half of North Pyongan Province, and I flew over the entire area in North Korean helicopters. For six weeks in July and August 1997, an American army officer and I traveled every other day on different roads in a

jeep to and from the area around Unsan.

At Unsan there is also a big tunneling project. The town is about twenty five miles northeast of Yongbyon. The tunneling involves mining for gold. Unsan has been the center of gold mining in the area since an American company opened the first mine there about one century ago.

A few miles south of Unsan, a new, two-lane, concrete highway is being constructed. The road begins near the town of Kujang to the south, a coal mining town on the Chongjong River, and runs north toward the Chinese border. We first saw the road in June 1996 and asked if we could use it instead of the bumpy dirt road we always traveled. But our North Korean guides repeatedly told us the road was incomplete, and that a tunnel still had to be built to connect the new highway to the four lane highway that connects Pyongyang to the mountain resort at Myohyang-san.

Late last July, an American Army officer and I rented a Korean People's Army helicopter -- $1,000 in cash in US dollars per hour. We needed to check the procedures for emergency medical evacuation by helicopter in case one of the US or North Korean soldiers searching for US Korean War remains was injured. We flew from Pyongyang north to an air base just south of the Chongjong River near Yongbyon, then east along the Chongjong River and north again to an area southwest of Unsan. Our flight took us very close to the area where the satellite photographs reportedly spotted a large construction site.

Nothing seemed unusual. The North Korean government did not seem concerned that we might spot some secret construction site, otherwise they would not have let us fly. Coal mines and a few factory towns dotted the landscape. Sometimes smoke came out of a mountainside, and roads seemed to disappear into a hillside. Probably these where places where factories had been built inside mountains. In North Korea, this is normal.

5. Fragrant Mountains

Many days I have relaxed at the mountain resort of Myohyang-san, the Fragrant Mountains, appropriately named for the pleasing scent of pine that greets the visitor. This was Kim Il-sung's favorite place, and he died there in July 1994. His son, Kim Jong-il, now frequently visits the resort. Normal visitors stay either at the gray triangular tourist hotel or a government guest house further up the road. From the hotel, if one walks up the road for about a mile, a large construction site is visible. Here workers have been tunneling into the mountain since the fall of 1994. Huge piles of crushed granite dot the mountain side. The project's main entrance is covered with wooden scaffold. Thousands of workers each morning slowly stroll up the road toward the site.

There is nothing secret about the place. When complete, an enormous new exhibition hall will have been built inside the mountain to house gifts visiting dignitaries have presented to North Korea's new leader Kim Jong- il. The new hall will be modeled after the one first built to house his father's gifts.

6. Spy Satellites Can't Think

American's have an old saying - pictures never lie. But spy satellites and their pictures cannot think. Without human interpretation, pictures are not "intelligence." Actually, a picture can give us a false sense of confidence about how much we really know. Human analysis, on the other hand, is not infallible; it is only an interpretation, an educated guess about what is reality.

For example, a satellite may take a picture of a long white cylinder in a parking lot at a factory in Changwon, South Kyongsang Province. What is the white cylinder? Is it a water or propane gas tank, or a missile component? We do not know until intelligence analysts jointly interpret the picture using information from many other sources. Even then we probably will not get total agreement about what the picture reveals. All we have is an "educated guess" until we either examine the object ourselves or ask someone we trust what it is. We do not trust North Koreans so asking about what they are building will not end our suspicions, even if they tell us the truth. The best solution is to visit the place ourselves.

7. "Optimists" versus "Pessimists"

For a decade, the American intelligence community has been arguing about North Korea. Analysts in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), National Security Agency and State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) still do not agree about how many nuclear weapons North Korea may have. In 1995, they began debating whether North Korea really needed food aid. A year later, these same analysts publicly exchanged verbal blows over whether North Korea was on the verge of collapse. Now the debate seems to be focused on whether North Korea is secretly trying to restart its nuclear program. Someone in this group apparently decided to win the argument, and to scare the American and Korean public into changing policy toward North Korea, by leaking secret "imagery intelligence" to the American press.

Behind all this squabbling there are two very different views of North Korea. One view is held by a group of analysts we will call optimists because they believe North Korea is capable of being transformed into a responsible member of the international community. The other group consists of pessimists who do not believe this can happen. The optimists like South Korea's "sunshine" diplomacy, the pessimists are uncertain about it.

The optimists argue that the foremost goal of North Korea's leaders is national survival, not the forceful domination of South Korea. Pyongyang, the optimists believe, is trying to gradually end its isolation and beginning to engage the outside world. As evidence, they point to North Korea's increasing trade with non-socialist nations, its opening of the country to foreigners, and signing of the Basic Agreements with South Korea in 1992 and the Agreed Framework with the United States in 1994. They also cite North Korea's continuing cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Korea Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), the World Food Program (WFP) and numerous private, non-governmental organizations.

The optimists are convinced that Pyongyang is trying to use its potential to build weapons of mass destruction--in other words its nuclear and missile programs--as bargaining chips to achieve maximum gains for minimal concessions in negotiations with the United States. All the while, the optimists admit that North Korea remains a dangerous military power capable of abruptly starting war and destabilizing Northeast Asia.

The pessimists, on the other hand, are equally convinced that North Korea's primary goal remains the domination of the entire Korean peninsula. They view North Korea's current cooperation with the international community as a temporary expedient designed to lure the international community into helping Pyongyang to modernize its economy. North Korea may be economically weak now and on the verge of famine, but, pessimists in the American intelligence community believe, once it has restored its economic vigor, Pyongyang could unveil secretly hidden weapons of mass destruction and return to a coercive and hostile foreign policy toward both Seoul and Washington.

8. Needed - An On-the-Spot Visit

Our purpose here is not to pick sides. Both views have their merits. On the other hand, the recent leak of unsubstantiated "intelligence" certainly appears to have been an irresponsible effort by a "pessimist" within the American intelligence community. Their deed accomplished nothing constructive. The argument in the American intelligence community will continue. After all, that is what intelligence analysts are paid to do. On the other hand, unfortunately, the Korean people on both sides of the demilitarized zone have been frightened and confused, intensifying the half-century of distrust and fear that divides them.

Whether North Korea is building a "secret" new nuclear facility remains a mystery. Obviously, we are not likely to find out what is really going on in North Korea just by reading American newspaper stories based on "spy satellite" pictures.

What is a concerned citizen to do? We can stay calm and give our governments the time necessary to address the situation through appropriate diplomatic channels. North Korea, on the other hand, must respond constructively to these efforts. If Pyongyang has nothing to hide, and is sincere about fulfilling its pledges under the Basic Agreements and the Agreed Framework, its leaders should allow outsiders to visit the suspected site. This would be a concrete step toward calming the situation both on the Korean peninsula and in the American intelligence community. On the other hand, if North Korea does not cooperate and allow a visit, then it is time to become concerned.

III. NAPSNet 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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