

Policy Forum 09-093: North Korea: A Date in Pyongyang - but What Real Hope?



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North Korea: A Date in Pyongyang - But What Real Hope?

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By Aidan Foster-Carter

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I. Introduction

Aidan Foster-Carter, Honorary Senior Research Fellow in Sociology & Modern Korea at Leeds University, writes, "Nuclear weapons may be misguided self-defence, but state crime is North Korea's unforced and persistent choice. This is a pit Pyongyang dug for itself, as it has so many

others - while often resisting or even biting the helping hand that offers to pull it out. So the fear must be that Kim Jong-il has no desire to go straight; that indeed he cannot conceive of doing so. Or again, in all honesty what hope is there for a ruler who quails in fear at TV adverts for beer?"

This article appears by kind permission of NewNations.com, for whom it was written as December's monthly update on North Korea.

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II. Article by Aidan Foster-Carter

- "North Korea: A Date in Pyongyang - But What Real Hope?"

By Aidan Foster-Carter

In November the golden Korean autumn turns chillier. Trees shed their leaves, and the first flurries of snow herald the cold winter to come. Politically, by contrast, the hope is of a thaw and early spring. But the fear remains that despite some superficial (or dissembling) recent melting, deep down North Korea's political permafrost remains as icy and hard as ever.

Like October, this was a fairly uneventful month regarding North Korea. But on November 18 the US president Barack Obama, on a brief (less than 24 hours) stop in Seoul at the end of his east Asian tour, finally named the long-awaited date for his special envoy to visit North Korea. Stephen Bosworth - a part-timer, whose day job is Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in Boston; he was formerly US ambassador in Seoul and a long-serving career diplomat - will go to Pyongyang on December 8. This too will not be a lengthy sojourn: just a day and a half, according to the State Department.

Much, perhaps too much, is riding on this visit. The build-up to it has become almost as long and tedious as the two-month anticipation of North Korea's long-range rocket launch earlier this year. But at least we now have a date, and also in a sense an unofficial advance party.

Yonhap, the semi-official South Korean news agency, reported on November 21 that a trio of US experts was visiting Pyongyang during November 21-24. The group is led by Charles 'Jack' Pritchard: a former US nuclear negotiator in the Bush era, who quit in frustration and now heads the Korea Economic Institute (KEI), a Washington think-tank affiliated to an institute in Seoul, which publishes excellent materials on both Koreas. The other members are KEI's Nicole Finneman, and Scott Snyder: director of the Center for US Korea Policy at the Asia Foundation, and author of studies on North Korean negotiating behaviour, foreign NGOs in the DPRK, and Chinese relations with both Koreas.

Despite the stereotype of North Korea as a hermit kingdom, visits like this are not unusual. Bosworth himself visited Pyongyang earlier this year on a similar delegation, shortly before his appointment in March as US Special Representative for North Korea Policy. Such 'track two' encounters offer an opportunity for each side to sound the other out and size them up.

At the start of 2009 several separate US delegations found North Korea in truculent mood: seemingly uninterested in the chance of better ties afforded by a new US president explicitly committed to dialogue with America's foes. Missile and nuclear tests followed. The mood in Pyongyang now appears mellower, but as ever the question is whether this switch is merely superficial and tactical. Too much advance speculation is probably futile. By the time of next month's

Update, we shall know whether North Korea has genuinely recommitted to nuclear dialogue - in which case one wonders what April and May's fireworks were all about. More pessimistically, the fear must be - as we noted last month - that Kim Jong-il reckons that if India and Pakistan have got away with claiming *de facto* nuclear status, then so can he.

Human rights: the UN condemns, again

As ever, nukes are not the only North Korean concern. On November 19 the UN General Assembly's Third Committee passed a resolution expressing "very serious concern at... continuing reports of systemic, widespread, and grave violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea." This includes "torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment ... inhuman conditions of detention, public executions, extrajudicial and arbitrary detention, the absence of due process and the rule of law", as well as "the existence of a large number of prison camps and the extensive use of forced labour" and use of the death penalty for political or religious reasons. 53 countries co-sponsored the resolution, among them South Korea. It was passed by 97 votes to 19, with 65 abstentions. North Korea as usual dismissed this as a "political conspiracy of hostile forces", and boasted that it will remain "invincible forever."

This UN spotlight will continue in December, shifting from New York to Geneva. In a bid to get beyond the ritual of *pro forma* annual condemnations, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) now conducts Universal Periodic Review (UPR) sessions, using a question and answer format. North Korea's UPR session falls on December 7, on the eve of Bosworth's visit. Hopes of a constructive debate, which the UPR format is supposed to encourage, may prove illusory if Pyongyang's stance is as robust and unyielding as always.

France sticks its oar in

Jack Lang is a man of many parts. France's former minister of culture (twice) and education, who in his time has also been a theatre director and a law professor, was sent earlier this year by President Sarkozy - despite their political differences; Lang is a socialist - as his special envoy to Cuba. Now he has performed the same role vis-à-vis North Korea, visiting for five days from November 9. His declared aim was to begin a wide-ranging dialogue.

But there is more here than meets the eye. France may be the only major European country now not to have full diplomatic relations with North Korea - yet it was also the first major Western power to initiate such ties. The DPRK opened a trade mission in Paris as long ago as 1972. (Its early staff included Kim Yong-nam, whom Lang met in Pyongyang where this veteran foreign affairs expert now serves as titular head of state.) In 1984 President Francois Mitterrand, who had visited Pyongyang in 1981, in effect recognized the DPRK by allowing its Paris office the status of a "general delegation": a rank North Korea shared with Palestine and Quebec. South Korea, then ruled by fiercely anti-communist generals, was livid.

Despite this early start, France did not join the west European rush of the past few years to open full ties with the DPRK. Its ostensible reason was human rights abuses, but other EU countries suspect France is playing its own game. A French diplomat once told NewNations that France gets more attention from North Korea by withholding diplomatic relations. Nor has this hesitation prevented substantive contact, some at the highest levels. North Korea has long sent language students to train in France; it now also sends architects, among others.

Above all, whom does Kim Jong-il trust with his life? French doctors treated him last year in Pyongyang, just as they had done for his father Kim Il-sung back in 1991. (All is revealed [here](#)).

Similarly, it was to the Institut Curie in Paris that Kim Jong-il's Japanese-born consort, the former dancer Ko Yong-hee - mother of his third son and chosen dauphin, Kim Jong-eun - went to be treated for breast cancer, amid tight secrecy: maintained when she died there in 2004 and her body was quietly repatriated.

In sum, Jack Lang was not initiating anything. Rather, his visit to Pyongyang was the latest chapter in what is a long-established and deep-rooted bilateral relationship, even if formally it has never been fully consummated. Intimate, profound and discreet at the highest levels of state, this is to say the least a very special form of non-recognition - and ever so French.

Beer ads: plug pulled

Sijaki banida : The first step is half the journey. That Korean *sokdam* or proverb was trotted out *ad nauseam* in Seoul during the 'sunshine' era (1998-2007). Each tiny step forward, real or imagined, by Pyongyang was hailed as a breakthrough: proof positive that a fundamental and irreversible transformation had begun. North Korea would never be the same again.

But this begs the question. In reality, all too often the DPRK's few concessions go only so far - and no further. Thus family reunions, as discussed in last month's NewNations Update, remain today (when they happen at all) the same heart-breaking, inadequate, stylized once-for-all reality TV show that they have been from the beginning a decade ago. The first step is not half the journey. On the contrary it is as far as Pyongyang is ever prepared to go, period.

Just as often, the DPRK puts a tiny toe in the water - and then pulls it out again, fast. In July this year, North Korean television for the first time showed advertisements for commercial products, including beer (see [this video](#) , amongst others) as well as ginseng and quail. Optimists hailed a new dawn in Pyongyang. It proved false, or at least short-lived. In early November, reports in Seoul claimed that such adverts abruptly ceased on August 29, less than two months after they had begun on July 2.

Kim Jong-il was said to be furious when he saw the ads, regarding them as the thin end of the wedge of Chinese-style market reforms and hence of capitalism. He reportedly sacked his long-time confidant Cha Sung-su, who after a 40 year broadcasting career was in charge of all TV programming as chairman of the Central Broadcasting Commission. If true this seems unfair on Cha, who was only trying to follow the dear leader's instruction to create "more interesting and diverse" TV programmes. Cha is also a well-known poet in North Korea, whose works are said to include "By the Car Window" and "Gun Salute."

An alternative suggestion is that most of the million or so North Koreans who could view the ads, though themselves a privileged minority as citizens of Pyongyang, could not afford such delights; so the ads were pulled lest they stoke unrest amid the current chronic food shortage.

Still smuggling in Sweden

On November 20 Swedish customs authorities arrested two North Koreans in Stockholm, in a private car found to contain some 230,000 cartons of Russian cigarettes. The pair, a man and woman in their fifties, are said to be DPRK diplomats based in Russia; whence they had driven to Finland and taken a ferry from Helsinki. They tried to claim diplomatic immunity, but this let-out only applies in the state where one is stationed. It remains to be seen whether Sweden will charge them, or just expel them - in which case no crime will be recorded.

There is a strong sense of *déjà vu* here. North Korea's long and ignominious history of state

smuggling began in Scandinavia 33 years ago in 1976, when all four Nordic countries - who had only recently recognized the DPRK, to displeasure in Washington - expelled a total of a dozen diplomats for blatant smuggling. A contemporary report of this episode can be read [here](#) . Erik Cornell, Sweden's first ambassador to Pyongyang, covers the matter fully in his book *North Korea under communism: report of an envoy to paradise?* (much of which can be read at Google Books.)

A third of a century and literally hundreds of busts later, the reprobates are still at it. Another recent case from Finland is reported by the Koreanist anthropologist Antti Leppänen, [again with reference back to the original sin in the 1970s](#) . For the overall phenomenon of North Korean state crime, Sheena Chestnut's book-length study remains indispensable; it can be read [here](#) . For shorter recent overviews see articles [here](#) and [here](#) .

NewNations' house style is not normally to provide such references. If we do so this time, it is because DPRK state crime is both less well known and not as widely acknowledged as the omnipresent nuclear brouhaha. Moreover, the elusiveness of the issue means that the culprits have rarely if ever been convicted in court; diplomats are normally expelled rather than tried.

Because of this, some are tempted to give North Korea the benefit of the doubt in this area. That seems both kindly and credulous. As William Newcomb, a former senior economist at the US State Department, puts it in his recent overview cited above:

This brief discussion proceeds on the basis that more than 30 years of accumulated evidence, even if some is circumstantial or anecdotal, is sufficient to make the case for North Korean involvement in illicit activities. It does not offer fresh arguments to those who reject allegations of DPRK counterfeiting and narco-trafficking without the revelation of more convincing and detailed proof. (Even they, however, surely must wonder how DPRK representatives overseas, uniquely among diplomats, have for years been able to gain access to wide varieties and large quantities of contraband, to include narcotics, other controlled substances, and counterfeit currency.)

State criminality, if less menacing than weapons of mass destruction or human rights abuses, exemplifies the North Korea conundrum. In a word: Why do they do this? Newcomb again:

North Korean criminality stands apart. It is quite rare to encounter a state that purposefully adopts policies that enmesh its official institutions, political organizations, and their members in a routine of criminal conduct.

Morality aside, what kind of *raison d'etat* seriously reckons the short-term gains from such petty crime - or even more serious pursuits, like counterfeiting US currency; on which see [this article](#) - could be worth the consequences: global opprobrium, and self-exclusion from the kinds of legitimate trade that have let China and Vietnam prosper while North Korea remains mired in poverty?

All this has a bearing on matters nuclear too. Stephen Bosworth is an experienced negotiator with North Korea. As first head of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) during 1995-7, he was intimately involved in a more hopeful phase of US-DPRK relations under Bill Clinton. Even then, North Korea was cheating on the spirit of the 1994 Agreed Framework by covertly pursuing a second nuclear programme based on enriched uranium (UEP). We shall never know whether Kim Jong-il would have yielded up all his plutonium in exchange for the two light water reactors which KEDO was building. In late 2002 the Bush administration chose for whatever

reason to confront North Korea over UEP, but this ploy backfired disastrously. The AF unravelled, and Kim got the bomb.

The North Korean nuclear issue has now been ongoing for over 20 years. One tries to hope that Ambassador Bosworth can somehow pull a rabbit from this moth-eaten magician's hat. Yet the DPRK's dreary recidivism in its even longer record of state crime is disheartening. It suggests a regime which neither respects nor trusts anyone, but rather sees the rest of us as mugs and fair game. Or for an example directly related to the nuclear issue, how on earth could Pyongyang have been secretly flogging a clone of its Yongbyon nuclear facility to Syria even while purportedly pursuing denuclearization in good faith at the Six Party Talks?

Yet still some blithe souls reckon the leopard can change its spots, given the right incentives. That case has recently been made by a seasoned Russian ex-diplomat, Georgy Toloraya in [this article](#) . But is it really desirable, or politically feasible, to offer yet more sweeteners upfront to a regime whose record over many decades suggests that short-run rent-seeking behaviour is hard-wired into its modus operandi?

Nuclear weapons may be misguided self-defence, but state crime is North Korea's unforced and persistent choice. This is a pit Pyongyang dug for itself, as it has so many others - while often resisting or even biting the helping hand that offers to pull it out. So the fear must be that Kim Jong-il has no desire to go straight; that indeed he cannot conceive of doing so. Or again, in all honesty what hope is there for a ruler who quails in fear at TV adverts for beer?

But we have to keep trying, even if this is the triumph of hope over experience. As Antonio Gramsci put it: "Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will." (Yet a fat lot of good it did him; the great Italian Marxist and anti-fascist died a prisoner in Mussolini's jails.)

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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