


Policy Forum 07-024: So Far, So Fast: What's Really Behind The Bush Administration's Course Reversal On North Korea - And Can The Negotiations Succeed?

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By Don Oberdorfer

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I. Introduction

Don Oberdorfer, a former Washington Post diplomatic correspondent, author of "The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History", and chairman of the U.S.-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University's Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, writes, "Four months after North Korea's underground blast, it's astonishing how far the negotiations aimed at reversing North Korea's nuclear success have progressed-and how much the Bush administration has changed course... But the fact that success is also a possibility is a direct result of the impressive efforts of the diplomats who are seeking denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

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II. Article by Don Oberdorfer

- "So Far, So Fast: What's Really Behind The Bush Administration's Course Reversal On North Korea-And Can The Negotiations Succeed?"

By Don Oberdorfer

At 10:36 a.m. last Oct. 9, the first nuclear blast ever to shake the Korean peninsula created an artificial earthquake near P'unggye in the remote northeastern corner of North Korea. As nuclear detonations go, it was smaller than expected-less than 1 kiloton, the equivalent of 1,000 tons (2 million pounds) of TNT. However, that would be enough, according to U.S. expert Siegfried Hecker, former chief of the U.S. nuclear laboratory at Los Alamos, to kill instantly many thousands of people if it exploded in a major city.

North Korea hailed the blast as a historic event that had been conducted entirely with "indigenous wisdom and technology." Following an unexplained delay of 11 days, it began holding mass celebrations of the country's nuclear status. Signs were erected on Pyongyang street corners declaring LET US MAKE SHINE FOREVER OUR BECOMING A NUCLEAR POWER, A HISTORIC INCIDENT IN THE 5,000 YEARS OF OUR PEOPLE'S HISTORY.

The widespread belief, which I shared at the time, was that North Korea's entry into the nuclear weapons club would mean the virtual end of the Six-Party Talks aimed at rolling back and eventually eliminating the country's nuclear materials and programs. I was wrong.

In mid-January, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill and North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye-gwan held unannounced meetings in the embassies of the two nations in Berlin, where they agreed on the basic outlines of an accord that was formally adopted on Feb. 13 by all members of the resurrected Six-Party Talks.

Following up on that agreement, Hill and Kim met again on March 5 and 6 across the polished

dining table in the private suite of the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations on the 42nd floor of the elegant Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York. There they worked to hammer out details of the actions each side is committed to take in the first phase of the agreement, by mid-April: North Korea is to shut down and seal its plutonium-producing nuclear reactor at Yongbyon and invite back the international inspectors who had been kicked out of the country three years earlier; and the United States is to end the U.S. Treasury Department investigation of Banco Delta Asia, the Macao bank that was integral to many North Korean financial transactions, and to begin the process of removing the country from its list of states supporting international terrorism and from the list of official U.S. enemies under the Trading with the Enemy Act. Hill made clear that successful negotiations could lead to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Washington and Pyongyang-so long as the North Koreans faithfully fulfill any promises they make.

Ironically, the suite where the two negotiators met had been only recently vacated by former ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton, an outspoken opponent of bilateral negotiations with the North. He was well known for calling North Korean leader Kim Jong Il a "tyrannical dictator" who presided over a country that is for many "a hellish nightmare." In return, a North Korean spokesman labeled Bolton "human scum."

For most of his six years in office, President George W. Bush had also been opposed to bilateral dealings with North Korea and supremely uninterested in normalizing relations with Kim's regime. Nor has he been complimentary about North Korea, labeling it in 2002 as part of an "Axis of Evil" along with Iraq and Iran, and volunteering to author Bob Woodward in August of that year, "I loathe Kim Jong Il!" Nonetheless, Bush's policy, if not his personal views, began to change dramatically late last year, making possible the negotiations that took place in New York last week.

How and why U.S. policy has shifted dramatically is a matter of great speculation in Washington and a variety of other capitals. No definitive answers have been established, but the following are among the most frequently cited factors:

- The Oct. 9 test itself, the climax of at least four decades of effort by North Korea, which changed the security environment in Northeast Asia.

As a result of its activities at Yongbyon, North Korea is believed to possess about 50 kilograms of plutonium, enough to be the radioactive core of six to 10 nuclear weapons, depending on their size and efficiency. Unless checked, North Korea could continue to produce more weapons material and stage many more tests. This could touch off a nuclear arms race in Asia, potentially involving Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, among others. The nightmare for the United States is that North Korea could produce enough plutonium to have some to spare for potential sales to anti-American states or subnational groups. With a military attack on North Korea's military facilities virtually ruled out as too dangerous or ineffective, diplomacy emerged as the only credible way to protect U.S. national security and world order.

Throughout the 20th century, Washington paid full attention to North Korea only when the isolated communist state was considered a credible threat to the United States or its allies: in the 1950-53 Korean War; during the 1993-94 North Korean drive for nuclear materials, leading to negotiations and the Agreed Framework; after the 1998 North Korean ballistic missile test, which generated the negotiations led by former Defense secretary William Perry, and after the collapse of the Agreed Framework and the start of North Korea's all-out drive to produce nuclear materials, which generated the Six-Party Talks. In the light of this history, it's not surprising that the nuclear weapons test of last October got the attention of U.S. policymakers, although it is surprising that negotiations have proceeded so far, so fast.

- The dramatic political reverses of Bush's Republican Party in last November's congressional elections.

The elections brought to power the opposition Democratic Party in both houses of Congress. Leading Democrats have been highly critical of Bush's foreign policies, especially in Iraq but also in Asia. Unless it took some actions to deal with the new nuclear threat, the Bush administration would probably face hostile congressional hearings and perhaps congressional investigations of its policies in Northeast Asia.

- Internal changes within the Bush administration, including the resignation of John Bolton and of other foes of engagement with North Korea.

The shifting Washington landscape has also reduced the remarkably strong influence of Vice President Dick Cheney, whose office was believed to be the center of opposition to engagement with adversary states. When a senior South Korean diplomat asked William Perry why the Bush team had reversed course on North Korea, the answer was stark and simple: "Because Cheney wasn't there."

- The influence of China, which has become a crucial partner of the United States in opposing North Korea's ballistic-missile and nuclear weapons activities.

China has its own reasons for opposing a nuclear-armed North Korea, especially the potential impact on the nuclear weapons ambitions of forces within Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Moreover, its role as convener of the Six-Party Talks since 2003 has been important to Chinese prestige, regional authority and its relations with the United States. Chinese leaders seem determined to do everything possible-including persuading Bush to engage North Korea-to prevent the talks' collapse and a nuclearized Northeast Asia.

A central factor in the change of U.S. policy, although with uncertain influence on Bush's personal thinking, is the work of Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, who emerged as the administration's leader on negotiations with North Korea. A career Foreign Service officer, Hill served briefly in the U.S. Embassy in Seoul early in his career but until 2004 had spent most of his diplomatic life in Europe. His language skills are in Polish, Serbo-Croatian, Macedonian and Albanian. He first came to widespread notice as an aide to Richard Holbrooke in the high-wire, high-stakes diplomacy in Bosnia in 1995-97. Holbrooke described Hill as "brilliant, fearless and argumentative." Recently, Hill earned all those adjectives as U.S. ambassador to Seoul in 2004-05 and since April 2005 as assistant secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs.

For much of the past two years, Hill's most important negotiations have been at home within the Bush administration rather than abroad with North Korea or others. Hill fought hard against restrictions on his negotiating authority imposed by Bush administration conservatives and, unlike his predecessor, Jim Kelly, sometimes managed to succeed. I wrote in my journal in August 2005, when he had been in the job only four months, "My impression is that Hill was given the ball and is running with it as far and fast as he can, with protection from [Secretary of State] Condi Rice and a consciousness of where USA danger points are." At times he boldly took steps on his own-such as holding social meetings with his North Korean counterpart, Kim Kye-gwan-and defended his actions later against administration critics.

At times his efforts were complicated and even frustrated by enemies within who opposed negotiations with North Korea. After he quickly forged a positive working relationship with the North Korean negotiator, Kim invited Hill to visit Pyongyang in the autumn of 2005 and in May 2006, but he was not permitted to do so. On the latter occasion, White House spokesman Tony Snow

declared, "The United States is not going to engage in bilateral negotiations with the government of North Korea." In April 2006 unofficial experts of the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue went to great trouble to invite both Hill and Kim to a meeting in Tokyo. Both of them attended but Hill was not permitted to have substantive, or even cursory, discussions with his counterpart. All of which makes remarkable the events of recent months following the Oct. 9 North Korean nuclear test and culminating-so far-in the intensive bilateral meetings between Hill and Kim across John Bolton's former dining table.

In the immediate aftermath of the nuclear test, the U.N. Security Council unanimously "condemned" the test and adopted economic and political sanctions against nuclear- and missile-related organs of North Korea. Significantly, China voted for sanctions against North Korea-as it had done following the July ballistic missile tests-after maneuvering to water them down somewhat. North Korea, which depends on China for energy and food, as well as for political protection, took notice of the attitude and actions of its giant neighbor. Reports from the area suggest that to emphasize its unhappiness, China also cut off the supply of spare parts to North Korea's military and abruptly stopped building a bridge for the North Koreans across the Yalu River. On Oct. 19, just 10 days after the nuclear test, Kim Jong Il met Chinese State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan, a former foreign minister, in Pyongyang to hear China propose that North Korea return to the Six-Party Talks and work flexibly toward a denuclearized Korean Peninsula. When he returned to Beijing, Tang informed Secretary of State Rice and asked her to arrange for Hill, then in the South Pacific, to fly to the Chinese capital to meet Kim Kye-gwan, who would fly in from Pyongyang. Seven hours of meetings between Hill and Kim, some with their Chinese counterpart, Vice Foreign Minister Wu Dawei, produced an agreement to resume the Six-Party Talks with North Korean participation.

After a great deal of diplomatic maneuvering in November, the formal talks in Beijing held Dec. 18-22 proved to be a disappointment. North Korea refused to engage with the others on the issues of its nuclear weapons program and passed word to the Americans that its negotiator lacked instructions from home. The night the talks ended, Hill sent his aide Sung Kim, director of the State Department Office of Korean Affairs, to the North Korean Embassy with the message that Hill would be willing to meet Kim Kye-gwan for bilateral talks in another city to carry on the nuclear dialogue. Two days after Christmas the word came back that Kim wished to meet Hill in Europe. This was the genesis of their meetings in Berlin on Jan. 16-18, which produced important breakthroughs toward halting and eventually eliminating North Korea's nuclear activities, but which also required U.S. flexibility and compromises.

Secretary Rice stopped off in Berlin on Jan. 17 on her way back from discussions in the Middle East and was briefed in person by Hill. Rice then took the extraordinary step of calling Bush directly, as well as her former deputy, national-security adviser Stephen Hadley, to urge-and obtain-approval of the course that Hill had outlined in his talks with Kim. This action bypassed the Washington bureaucracy, some of whose officials have thrown up roadblocks in the past to meetings and agreements with the North.

Despite the progress made with the Feb. 13 accords and the meetings in New York in the past few days, many hurdles remain before solid progress is assured toward cessation of North Korea's nuclear weapons activities and eventual denuclearization.

One of the difficult issues is North Korea's acknowledgement and cessation of its activities to produce highly enriched uranium, a nuclear weapons material different from the plutonium that has been produced in the Yongbyon reactor. There is ample evidence from Pakistan that AQ Khan, the former illicit salesman of nuclear weapons materials and technology, supplied North Korea with at least a small number of centrifuges with which highly enriched uranium can be made. This information was the basis of the Bush administration's 2002 accusation that North Korea was

cheating on its obligations under the Agreed Framework. This charge led to the end of the U.S.-North Korean pact at the end of that year and Pyongyang's resumption of full-scale weapons activity at Yongbyon, where it produced the plutonium used in the Oct. 9 blast.

There is growing doubt in U.S. official and scientific quarters that Pyongyang has obtained or manufactured enough centrifuges and other materials to produce weapons-usable enriched uranium. The doubts surfaced publicly in the late-February testimony before Congress of Joseph DeTrani, the chief U.S. national intelligence officer for North Korea, creating a sensation among critics who charged that the administration had needlessly destroyed the Agreed Framework in 2002, leading to the production of the radioactive materials that comprise the North Korean nuclear arsenal.

Kim Kye-gwan has told Hill on several occasions, including the recent talks, that North Korea is willing to discuss the highly enriched uranium issue with the United States, but it is uncertain whether the discussion he has in mind will satisfy U.S. officials. Hill has demanded that North Korea "come clean" in laying out all that it has done to produce this weapons material.

The Feb. 13 accord, accepted and endorsed by all parties to the Six-Party Talks, contains many detailed commitments, any of which could be the subject of intense bargaining between the United States and North Korea, as well as other parties. Hill and Kim addressed some of those issues at the Waldorf-Astoria and emerged with expressions of satisfaction that these early talks had gone well.

Four months after North Korea's underground blast, it's astonishing how far the negotiations aimed at reversing North Korea's nuclear success have progressed-and how much the Bush administration has changed course. None of this means that the road ahead will be smooth or that a positive outcome is guaranteed. Failure is still very much a possibility. But the fact that success is also a possibility is a direct result of the impressive efforts of the diplomats who are seeking denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

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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