The Case of the Rescinded Invite

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by Roger Cavazos

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I. Introduction

Roger Cavazos asks, "What happened to Ambassador Robert King's invite to North Korea?" How could things have gone so disastrously off-track in 72 hours and what does it mean for the future of the relationships between the U.S. and North Korea? Roger Cavazos is a Nautilus Institute Associate and retired US military officer with assignments in the intelligence and policy communities.

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II. Policy Forum by Roger Cavazos

The Case of the Rescinded Invite

What happened to Ambassador Robert King's invite to North Korea?

In the late afternoon of August 27th (early August 28th Korean time) the U.S. State Department sent out a press release stating Ambassador Robert King would go to North Korea and return with the American Kenneth Bae. Kenneth Bae is an American of Korean descent who ran a tourist agency in China. In November of 2012 Kenneth Bae was arrested in North Korea, convicted in April 2013, and in May sentenced to fifteen years of compulsory labor. [1] [2]

The State Department announced Robert King's visit was cancelled on August 30th. [3] What could have so disastrously derailed this seemingly done deal within 72 hours? Considering possible answers raises some interesting deterrence insights and also many questions about future engagement with North Korea--in particular, the Six Party Talks could now be a much more difficult sell.

There are likely many reasons for canceling the visit which will never be fully known, but what we do know is that North Korea on August 30th complained of the U.S. flying B-52 bombers in Korean airspace. We already know B-52s strike a particularly discordant note in the collective North Korean psyche (as Peter Hayes articulated here based on personal interactions with North Koreans). [5] On the 31st of August (Korea time), North Korea explicitly tied the decision to cancel the visit to the B52 flights. North Korea also clarified that this information was relayed via their New York channel. On the 30th of August, North Korea via their official press complained that the U.S. flew three separate missions of B52s on the 15th, 21st and 27th of August. KCNA's excerpt for the relevant portions state:

> *On August 27, the U.S. imperialist aggressors flew two B-52H nuclear strategic bombers to the sky above*

> *South Korea from an air force base in the **U.S. mainland** to stage a nuclear attack drill targeting the DPRK before their deployment on Guam.* [4] *… At night on August 15 and during the day on August 21, a few days after they started Ulji Freedom Guardian, they flew **Guam-based** B-52H to the sky above Jik Islet in South Korea, **two planes** each, staging DPRK-targeted nuclear strike drills.*

There are three particularly interesting phrases hidden in the above statement (**bolded**) indicating the North Koreans (or at least a finite subset of them) have a fairly good idea of what goes on outside of North Korea's borders.

Permeable News Membrane for Some

First, through the statements above, we can see that some North Koreans understand extended nuclear deterrence does not emanate from the Korean peninsula. If there were nuclear weapons on the southern half of the peninsula, why would B52s have to fly from Guam and/or the U.S. mainland? The answer is because there really are no nuclear devices in South Korea.

North Korea is purposely being coy when claiming to know that the aircraft flew at night or day and how many aircraft were in each sortie. There are plenty of ways for North Korea to discern those details (such as monitoring radios and tracking social media) but they most likely want to convey the impression that they see and know all. The specificity may even be designed to start an "insider threat" hysteria.

That North Korea chose to announce that they were using the New York Channel means there are now more than a few handfuls of North Koreans who are aware of the channel. Those in other channels may think or worry that their channel is diminished. When Rodong Sinmun (an official North Korean newspaper) says, "*Despite the fact that we clearly notified the U.S. side of this through the New York contact channel, it is something surprising that the U.S. is making irrelevant remarks that it was surprised by our action.* "[6] it is likely those in the NY channel hear an oblique criticism and worry that somehow Pyongyang blames the New York channel for the Americans not clearly understanding the situation.

North Korea's points on extended deterrence, the numbers and origination of flights and mentions of the New York channel—while largely unstated—show that some North Koreans are not isolated and have knowledge of the outside world. However, that does not mean these more knowledgeable subsets of the population are some inflection point for change.

There is also the matter of context and contemporaneous events. When the U.S. announced Ambassador King's visit, the B52 flights had already taken place at least twice and possibly a third time. The visit was not cancelled until just prior to Ambassador King's originally scheduled departure from Tokyo on August 30th (Korea time). Most U.S. domestic and international media believed it was very likely that President Obama would order military strikes on Syria as early as August 30th. This may be sensitive, but it is unlikely North Korean elite wanted to portray a good relationship just prior to U.S. military strikes. Given North Korea's style of government, it is extremely unlikely that they would have foreseen any scenario in which the President decided to consult with Congress.

Four Party, Six Party, No Party

Unfortunately, the blame game will continue with negative repercussions for all.

North Korea likely believes they had been extremely restrained by not voicing the same concerns about the UFG exercises which usually accompany the exercise. According to the North Korean timelines from their articles, they did not publicly report the B52 flights until the end of the exercise.

In North Korean minds, they were likely upset by the EXPLICIT vice implicit de-coupling of discussing Bae AND nuclear issues. They think the U.S. was attempting to get Kenneth Bae (a human rights issue) and avoid discussing nuclear issues (a security issue). There are likely many North Koreans who, as a matter of political survival and/or principle, will be convinced they can't trust the U.S.

China's lead Six Party Talks negotiator was in North Korea when the announcement of Ambassador King's travel and sudden non-travel were announced. Let me be clear – there is no reason whatsoever to believe China had any part in either announcement. All our Chinese interlocutors stated direct U.S.-North Korea contact was positive and the U.S. should pursue it whenever possible. They also stressed the great effort China was making to convene Six Party Talks or even Four Party Talks. However, North Korea's cancellation of the invite while the Chinese negotiator was still present in North Korea meant that an entire week of discussions between China and North Korea on re-starting Six Party Talks was mostly for naught.

The situation and level of trust between the U.S. and North Korea along with President Obama's focus on U.S. domestic issues and Syria mean he is now unlikely to expend any political capital on the North Korean issue. Almost all the bureaucracies in the U.S. will see the North Korea's last minute cancellation as capricious and yet as another reason to distrust North Korea.

It is also possible that bureaucratic fault-lines in North Korea a la Patrick MacEachern's "Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-totalitarian Politics" played a role in the whole issue. If that is true, it means Kim Jong-un will likely crack down even harder, meaning any kind of discussions with North Korea (be they Track II, business, or official) will face even stronger headwinds. In the case of Six Party Talks, the single ray of good news is that North Korea's statements did not specifically rule them out.

Conclusion

Given that U.S.-DPRK relations were on a slightly positive slope, this latest episode is particularly troublesome since it has the potential to set back so much in the small amounts of trust that were just starting to accumulate. If the past is any precedent—and most Asian countries avidly follow history—the Track II dialogues and some other talks may encounter headwinds, but will likely persevere enough to keep some channels open.

III. References

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[6] Korea Central News Agency, “Spokesman for DPRK FM accuses U.S. of spoiling atmosphere for humanitarian dialogue”, 31 August 2013.

IV. NAUTILUS INVITES YOUR RESPONSES

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