Policy Forum 09-065: The Significance of Clinton’s Visit to North Korea

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The Significance of Clinton's Visit to North Korea

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By Tong Kim

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I. Introduction

Tong Kim, Adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University SAIS and a visiting professor at the University of North Korean Studies, writes, "it is high time that both Washington and Pyongyang take a fresh look at where they are and to get out of the box in search for a bold pragmatic path

toward a win-win resolution of the half century old U.S.-North Korea hostile relationship. North Korea can survive without nuclear weapons and the United States can undertake negotiations before the North gives up its nuclear programs. The Clinton trip offers both sides a fresh opportunity to make the first positive move."

II. Article by Tong Kim

- "The Significance of Clinton's Visit to North Korea"
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After former president Bill Clinton's dramatic meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il that resulted in freeing the two American journalists, who have joined their families back in the United States, attention is drawn to what may flow from that first highest level contact between Washington and Pyongyang since the start of the Obama administration.

The White House and the State Department emphatically portrayed Mr. Clinton's trip as "a humanitarian mission" that had no direct bearing on the administration's policy on North Korea. Nevertheless, many watchers do not readily accept the explanation. Without the release of the two American journalists, it would have been impossible to consider revising the administration's pressure policy.

Although not much has been known but more will be unfolded or leaked on the actual exchanges between Kim Jong Il and Bill Clinton, their meeting may eventually have a far reaching impact on the future of U.S.-North Korea relations from the perspective of what has long been known correctly or incorrectly. The White House national security advisor, General Jim Jones, who had asked if Mr. Clinton would go to the North, said on the record that he hoped Clinton's trip would "ultimately lead to progress... to some good things."

Change may come more readily from the North than from the United States as a result of Clinton's symbolic visit, which Kim Jong Il could use internally as a justification to reengage the United States. Chairman Kim Jong Il demonstrated that he has recovered his health and he has no trouble staying in control, putting an end to the speculation of an imminent collapse due to his terminal illness and from succession trouble. But his decision will also depend on his reading of U.S. response to his release of the two Americans and to his consistent interest in improved relations with the United States, a major point he must have reaffirmed to Clinton this time.

I have often argued that we don't know very much about what is going on in North Korea and we should learn more about the North through interactive engagement. Absent reliable clandestine sources, we can analyze open source reports to gain some understanding of the state of affairs in the North, their intentions and plans on the short term and long term basis. But as seeing is believing, exchange in engagement is the best source of information. What Mr. Clinton and his party saw of and in Kim Jong Il and what they heard from him should be the most valuable gain for U.S. policy makers.

The presence of Kim Gey Gwan, North Korea's chief nuclear negotiator, on the scene of Clinton's arrival was insinuated as a linkage between Clinton's humanitarian mission and the nuclear issue. But more meaningfully his presence disproved the widely circulated rumor in Washington that he had been dismissed or sent to a labor camp because of his mishandling of the nuclear negotiations. He also attended the dinner reception for Mr. Clinton hosted by the National Defense Commission.

In the winter of 2000 and the spring of 2001, first vice chairman of the National Defense Commission Jo Myong Rok had not been seen for months after he visited Washington and served as

the counterpart host for Secretary of State Albright's visit to Pyongyang in October 2000. The press speculated his missing from public appearance as a dismissal from the job. Again the ground for speculation was his alleged failure in handling U.S.-North Korea relations. Soon afterwards Vice Marshal Jo started appearing again. What happened was he had been treated for his kidney problem at a hospital in China under a special arrangement made by Kim Jong Il's order. I had known Jo had a kidney problem and I had heard him say how caring his leader was about his health. The North Korean system relies on trust and loyalty between the leader and his subordinates.

North Korea's top man in charge of inter-Korean relations Kim Yang Gun, who has normally little to do with U.S. affairs, also attended Kim Jong Il's meeting with Clinton. His attendance seemed to have been carefully choreographed to send a signal that the North Korean leader was conscious of the U.S relations with the South and Seoul's sensitivity to the meeting. Kang Suk Ju, first vice foreign minister who had passed up the opportunity to take the position of foreign minister last year, of course attended the meeting as the chief foreign policy adviser to Chairman Kim Jong Il.

North Korea's news media all reported that the Clinton-Kim Jong Il meeting had "candid and in-depth discussions on the pending issue ...and reached a consensus of views on seeking a negotiated settlement of them." The reports also said Mr. Clinton "reflected views on ways of improving the relations," conveying "a verbal message" form President Obama.

The White House and Mrs. Clinton, secretary of state, adamantly denied the North Korean reports, stating that there was "no message from President Obama," and that the Clinton visit had no connection with the nuclear issue. President Obama reiterated on MSNBC that improved relations would involve the North Koreans "no longer developing nuclear weapons, not engaging in provocative behavior." There is no change in the U.S. policy. Washington will continue to implement UN sanctions in an effort to curb North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile activities.

In his first public comment on August 6 after his return from Pyongyang, Mr. Clinton confirmed the purpose of his trip as a humanitarian mission. But he carefully added: "I wanted our two countries to have the ability to decide where to go from here. But anything I say beyond that could inadvertently affect the decisions and moves either here or in North Korea and I have no business doing that. I am not a policy maker any more." Clinton will stay out of the North Korean business: there is one president at a time.

The administration's controlled management of the aftermath of Clinton's trip could be understood in the context of the international denuclearization effort involving South Korea, Japan, China and Russia, who all want the revival of the six party talks. However, it would probably require some new forms of dialogue to induce the North to denuclearization. The six party talks are dead as far as the North Koreans are concerned. But they are ready for talks - bilateral or multilateral - which may eventually lead to the reinstatement of the September 19 joint statement of the six party talks.

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The release of the two American women - Ling and Lee - and a meeting with Kim Jong Il -- was assured by North Korea as a primary precondition to Mr. Clinton's visit. The success of Clinton's "humanitarian effort" was not a surprise to those who were involved in the back channel negotiations. While everybody welcomed the happy ending of the two women's saga, some now

blame their "vainglorious" journalist adventure in crossing the North Korean border.

Conservative in Washington, including Senator John McCain, criticized Clinton's visit as the wrong move that helped Kim Jong Il for propaganda. To them it was seen as a reward to the provocative North Korea that tested nuclear weapons and missiles. They say it would have been better to send someone less prominent than the former president.

Now we know that North Korea specifically wanted Bill Clinton to come to Pyongyang, rejecting a list of several other prominent Americans whom the administration had considered for sending to the North - including Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, former vice president Al Gore (the employer of the reporters), New Mexico governor Bill Richardson (who had secured the release of another American detainee from the North before), Senate foreign relations chairman John Kerry, another former president Jimmy Carter, Korea Society chairman Don Gregg and a few others.

Clinton's trip has ended the long discussed idea of sending a high level envoy, Since there are no other private Americans who would surpass Mr. Clinton in stature in the eyes of the North Koreans, there would be no practical need to send another private envoy to the North to persuade them to give up their nuclear ambition and to return to talks. In this context, a high level Track II approach is over, and diplomacy is back on Track I.

In any case, it is high time that both Washington and Pyongyang take a fresh look at where they are and to get out of the box in search for a bold pragmatic path toward a win-win resolution of the half century old U.S.-North Korea hostile relationship. North Korea can survive without nuclear weapons and the United States can undertake negotiations before the North gives up its nuclear programs. The Clinton trip offers both sides a fresh opportunity to make the first positive move.

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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Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)

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Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org