

Policy Forum 05-82A: You Say Okjeryok, I Say Deterrent; No Wonder We Don't Agree

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By Tong Kim

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I. Introduction

Tong Kim, a recently retired State Department official and current research professor at Korea University, writes, "if there were something the North Koreans could choose to resolve first, it would be achieving a normal, friendly relationship of trust with the United States. After that, they believe, there will be no security threat to their regime ... If there were something the Americans could choose to resolve first, it would be nuclear dismantlement. So in all agreements, the sequence of measures is an issue. Judging by its language, this deal will be no different."

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II. Essay by Tong Kim

- You Say Okjeryok, I Say Deterrent; No Wonder We Don't Agree
by Tong Kim

It took two years of negotiations among teams of experts from six countries for the United States and North Korea to reach an agreement on nuclear weapons. It took one day for the accord to melt into misunderstanding and mistrust.

This comes as no surprise to me. For 27 years, I served as the State Department's senior Korean language interpreter, and I sat in on almost every high-level U.S.-North Korea meeting for more than a decade. In 17 visits to Pyongyang and many other meetings in the United States and other nations, I listened as these two countries' officials talked past each other, attaching different meanings and significance to the same words. This happens often enough to people speaking the same language; when they're using languages as different as English and Korean it's even more common.

The agreement reached a week ago in Beijing may yet turn out to be durable and useful. But the accord is a linguistic minefield, and it will take more than a week to tiptoe through its hidden meanings and obfuscations. The day after it was signed, North Korea and the United States were sparring over what they meant. Judging from my experience as an interpreter, I believe that there is as much room for misunderstanding as there is for better understanding.

For example, the statement issued in Beijing defined the goal of the six-party talks as "the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean peninsula," which could allow the Pyongyang regime to link inspections in the North to demands that South Korea, as part of the "Korean peninsula," also be subject to verification -- which I'm certain is not what Seoul had in mind. North Korea made a commitment to "abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs" -- but its translation used the Korean verb *pogi hada*, which could be interpreted to mean leaving the weapons in place rather than dismantling them. And what exactly did the United States mean when it agreed to help North Korea obtain a nuclear energy reactor at an "appropriate time"? Somewhere between yesterday and never, no doubt.

To an expert in language, especially diplomatic language, the tone of the new agreement could be summed up as a variation of Ronald Reagan's famous phrase from Cold War days: distrust and verify. North Korea betrayed its anxieties by insisting that the United States promise that it would not launch any attack or invasion against it. The American negotiators betrayed their own well-founded suspicions by asking for a veiled statement of the obvious -- such as the importance of observing the 1992 North-South agreement on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, as well as the importance of abiding by the purposes and principles of the U.N. Charter and recognized

norms of international relations.

As an interpreter, you have to know the background to understand the words. This was clear during my first visit to the North Korean capital in 1991. (Born and raised in Seoul, I came to the United States in 1972.) I traveled there with retired Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, who was leading a delegation of nuclear weapons experts and retired military officers. Stilwell had spent many years gathering intelligence on North Korea and had led the U.S. forces stationed in the South. The meeting took place with the Americans and North Koreans sitting on opposite sides of a wide lacquer table in a huge, high-ceilinged conference room at the Supreme People's Assembly building.

What the U.S. experts weren't prepared for was one of the first lines from Kim Yong Nam, then foreign minister and now the chairman of the presidium of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), as North Korea is officially known. He looked at the U.S. delegation and said: "Do you see horns on my head?" North Korean leader Kim Jong Il asked South Korean President Kim Dae Jung a similarly phrased question at the outset of their historic summit in June 2000.

What's the connection? Remember, both meetings took place before President Bush became president, before he labeled North Korea part of an "axis of evil." But close U.S. ally South Korea had portrayed North Korea's Communist regime as "devils." So while some might have seen the Kims' questions as taunts, I believed that implicit in those questions was a message: "You are wrong about us." But that would be a matter of interpreting motives, not words alone.

The words are hard enough to decipher. They come with traditions, hang-ups and history. Often the North Koreans deliberately choose ambiguous expressions. Until they revealed their alleged possession of nuclear weapons last February, their term for "nuclear deterrent" connoted a "nuclear capability" but didn't spell that out. It could mean nuclear weapons, or technology, or fissile material or processing facilities -- or all of these. To make matters worse, the North's interpreter repeatedly and incorrectly translated the Korean word for deterrent, *okjeryok*, as restraint. When pressed about the uranium enrichment program, a North Korean official said that Pyongyang was "bound to produce more powerful weapons than that." The North Korean interpreter translated the Korean phrase *mandlgiro deo itta* as "entitled to." If you're entitled to do something, you have a right that you may or may not exercise. But the Korean phrase really means that you're going to do it -- not just that you have the option.

Considering how bluntly North Korean officials wield language in their frequent harangues, they can be extremely sensitive to language used by others even when it makes little substantive difference. In an earlier round of talks, when the Americans demanded the "complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID)" of the North's "nuclear program," the North Koreans strongly objected that the phrase, especially the term "irreversible," made them seem like a "defeated nation." The South Korean press used seven different variations of my translation into Korean and the North came up with one of its own. Without changing any substance, the Americans started using "the dismantlement of all nuclear programs in a permanent, thorough and transparent manner subject to effective verification." After this linguistic alteration, the North Koreans became less obstinate. Somehow, "permanent" was easier for them to accept than "irreversible."

To me, interpreting North Korea and its intentions is not merely a matter of translating words, but of understanding gestures and symbols, because Americans and North Koreans live in different worlds, whose history, culture and values have been driven further apart by the 55 years of hostility since the Korean War.

In October 2000, a 72-year-old North Korean Army vice marshal, Jo Myong Rok, second in rank in Pyongyang, became the first North Korean ever to visit the White House. The marshal arrived in

Washington in a well-tailored suit, but before going to the White House, he asked for a room at the State Department, where he changed into his mustard-colored military uniform, with lines of heavy medals hanging on the jacket, and donned an impressive military hat with a thick gold band. When he walked into the Oval Office, Jo presented a sharp salute to President Bill Clinton, who looked somewhat puzzled or amused.

It was apparent to me that Vice Marshal Jo was doing this because he was carrying a message from the supreme commander of the Korean People's Army to the commander-in-chief of the United States. The message was simple: Since the major issue at the time was North Korea's missile program, which he characterized as a military issue, the top military commanders from both countries should get together to resolve it. The vice marshal tried to assure Clinton that North Korea's "dear leader" would never let the American president return empty-handed from a visit to Pyongyang. Clinton, however, never went.

In contrast to the American media description of North Korea as a "Stalinist Communist state," I have come to see it as a Confucian nationalist monarchy, based on traditional Korean values and reflecting the bitterness born of foreign invasions throughout Korean history. In Confucian society, loyalty to the ruler and respect for elders are basic tenets. The iconic stature of the late "great leader" Kim Il Sung isn't that different from the Confucian image of a divine ruler.

Because of these tenets, it was more important than most Americans realized for Clinton to issue a statement of "sympathy for the North Korean people" when Kim Il Sung died in 1994 in the middle of U.S.-North Korean negotiations in Geneva over the nuclear issue. The U.S. delegation in Geneva had debated what to say, and I told the members that on such occasions Koreans traditionally say simply, "I am at a loss for words." Later that day, the chief American delegate visited the North Korean mission and wrote in its condolence book, "Words cannot express the feeling of sympathy I have for the Korean people." After a mourning period, the attitude of the North Korean negotiators was conspicuously more positive. This was something the Americans did not expect. And when Vice Marshal Jo visited Clinton, he also conveyed North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's gratitude to the American president for issuing a statement of condolence on the death of his father six years earlier.

When Madeleine K. Albright became the first U.S. secretary of state to visit Pyongyang less than two weeks after Jo's visit to the White House, she made a brief, quiet visit to the elder Kim's mausoleum. Later that day, Kim Jong Il profusely thanked the secretary for that controversial gesture -- which she defended in her memoir as "a diplomatic necessity" -- and for Clinton's message of sympathy. From the tone of his voice, he seemed genuinely touched. And he spent more than 10 hours with Albright, while ignoring a Chinese defense ministry delegation during our two-night stay. Recently the younger Kim said that denuclearization of the Korean peninsula was the last wish of his father; I think he really believes that carrying out his father's will is his filial duty in the Korean tradition.

When diplomats run into serious disagreements, they often agree to use ambiguity to disguise their differences. For example, the text of the 1994 Agreed Framework stated in part: "The DPRK will engage in North/South dialogue, as this Agreed Framework will help create an atmosphere that promotes such dialogue." The meaning depended on the interpretation of the word "as." Caught between the South Koreans' demand that the agreement should oblige the North to immediately engage the South, and the North Koreans' refusal to talk to the South, the Americans sidestepped the issue and let the two Koreas interpret the word differently. To the South Koreans, "as" meant "because," whereas the North Koreans translated it into "when." I see a number of similar ambiguities in the latest accord.

As a rule, the North Koreans argue that in the absence of mutual trust, neither nation should act first. Their insistence on simultaneous actions provides a useful tool for meeting halfway in each

step toward resolving the nuclear issue. If practiced well, it could also serve as an effective confidence building measure.

If there were something the North Koreans could choose to resolve first, it would be achieving a normal, friendly relationship of trust with the United States. After that, they believe, there will be no security threat to their regime. In Pyongyang's view, normalization would make it possible to conclude a peace treaty with the United States. If there were something the Americans could choose to resolve first, it would be nuclear dismantlement. So in all agreements, the sequence of measures is an issue. Judging by its language, this deal will be no different.

For the isolated North Koreans, the more they learn about America, the easier it becomes for them to talk in the American way. At the same time, if U.S. officials learn more about North Korea, it will become easier to find a common vocabulary and language that means the same thing to both sides.

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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Nautilus Institute

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

nautilus@nautilus.org