



## "Sweet and Sour" Diplomacy

by Ralph A. Cossa

"U.S.-NK Military Meet to Reduce Tensions."

"NK Threatens to Withdraw from Nuclear Agreement with U.S."

The frustrating thing about these two headlines, which recently ran on international wire services on the same day, is that they are both accurate. The Chinese may have invented "sweet and sour" as a way of cooking, but North Korea has perfected it as a foreign policy approach. As a veteran of negotiations with Pyongyang once noted, "I look forward to their most vitriolic outbursts . . . they normally come just before actual progress is going to be made."

In recent days, North Korean threats and propaganda blasts notwithstanding, some progress seems to have been made, not only in North-South relations, but in Pyongyang's relations with Washington as well. But, while no one questions Seoul's eagerness to move the process forward, serious questions continue to be raised about Pyongyang's sincerity . . . and about Washington's as well.

North-South Relations. The resumption of high-level dialogue between Seoul and Pyongyang provides the most cause for cautious optimism these days, even though it remains to be seen just how much progress will be made and to what effect. One test of Pyongyang's sincerity will be the resumption, as promised, of the program which allows the temporary reunion of families separated since the Korean War. Previous delays and outright cancellations by Pyongyang were particularly cruel, given the advanced age of many of the participants-in-waiting. Since Seoul has yielded to Pyongyang's demand that these tightly controlled reunions happen only at North Korea's Mt. Kumgang resort area (thereby keeping North Koreans from seeing, first hand, the South's amazing progress), there is no reason for further delays.

The real test, however, will be the resumption of military talks aimed at finally opening up a road and rail corridor between North and South (a topic that was no doubt high on Russian President Putin's agenda during his recent meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in Vladivostok, given the economic benefits Moscow sees in the opening of a direct transportation link into South Korea). The North has thus far failed to honor its part of the corridor bargain and has been even more reluctant to engage the South in any security-related talks. Even with these caveats, however, the North's current "sweet" approach toward the South is welcomed and encouraging. U.S.-North Korea. Washington has rightly linked progress on the North-South front to its own willingness to re-engage the North, with a resumption of inter-Korean dialogue being one of the reported prerequisites behind Secretary of State Colin Powell's agreement to hold a 15 minute informal chat with North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun in Brunei last month. As a result of that meeting, Pyongyang now appears set to welcome a high-level U.S. visitor -

most likely Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly - in the not-too-distant future. But, just when it seems the North is becoming more agreeable, it looks like Washington has decided to re-institute its own brand of sweet and sour diplomacy.

According to D.C. press reports, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton plans to give a "bellicose and threatening" speech about North Korea during his upcoming visit to Korea (28-30 Aug); one that aggressively denounces Pyongyang as an evil terrorist state and reportedly threatens U.S. withdrawal from the Agreed Framework (which swaps a freeze in North Korean nuclear activities for annual heavy fuel oil deliveries and the eventual construction of less proliferation-prone light water reactors) - Bolton has been a long-time critic of the agreement, even though President Bush has repeatedly pledged the U.S. will honor it as long as Pyongyang continues to do the same.

In all likelihood, the speech will be toned down prior to delivery (and might be delivered in Tokyo rather than Seoul), but much of its damage has already been done (which was the likely intent of those who leaked the speech in the first place). But one needs to ask why a self-professed hawk like Bolton, who has created more diplomatic problems than he has solved, is going to South Korea in the first place, given the lack of arms control issues between Washington and Seoul.

As presidential politics heats up in the South, almost anything an American politician says is likely to be taken out of context or be seen as part of some sort of conspiracy. Bolton's comments, if delivered as planned, would certainly reinforce in the minds of many in Seoul that Washington is indeed trying to undermine North-South (as well as U.S.-DPRK) dialogue, to the detriment of the current ruling party and its beleaguered president Kim Dae-jung. Why anyone in Washington thinks it's a good idea to send America's most undiplomatic diplomat to Seoul at this sensitive juncture remains anyone's guess. How openly antagonizing and insulting the North while feeding the worst suspicions and accusations of Southern critics serves U.S. national interests is, quite frankly, beyond this commentator's ability to comprehend.

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