



## **True Confessions?**

by Ralph A. Cossa

SEOUL/BUSAN - They say that a little bit of confession is good for the soul, but North Korea's sudden burst of religion is creating a moral dilemma for Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul. First, Pyongyang decides to come clean on the kidnapping of Japanese citizens, admitting to Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro that its agents did, as suspected, kidnap a number of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s and that most are now deceased. Then it confirms Washington's worst suspicions about its secret nuclear weapons program by confessing that it indeed has one, in direct violation to the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework, not to mention the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Safeguards Agreement, and the 1992 Joint North-South Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. What's going on here?

The reasons for playing true confessions with Japan are pretty obvious: Tokyo made it very clear that there would be no progress toward normalization (and the billions of dollars of colonial era compensation that this is expected to bring in) unless Pyongyang came clean on the abductions issue. But coming out of the nuclear closet does not promise the same awards, while putting the Japanese rewards even further at risk. The Japanese public has been so outraged by revelations of the poorly explained deaths and the controlled circumstances under which the five surviving abductees were allowed to visit Japan (with their children held hostage in North Korea to ensure their return) that the first confession may actually set back progress in Japan-DPRK relations.

Understanding the North's motivations for coming clean on their nuclear program at this point in time is more difficult. Clearly the North got caught with its hand in the cookie jar. When presented with the evidence of prohibited nuclear weapons activity by Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly during his visit to Pyongyang on Oct. 3-5 - the first high-level visit by a Bush administration official - the North reportedly vigorously denied the allegations at first and then, after an all-night meeting, was quoted as saying "of course we have a nuclear program," blaming President Bush's "axis of evil" speech and the presence of U.S. forces in the South for its deliberate violation of the above-referenced agreements.

Some see the North's actions as *deja vu* all over again. Recall the 1993/94 crisis prompted by the North's sudden withdrawal from the NPT, which led to the 1994 Agreed Framework (under which the North receives 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil annually and two light-water reactors (LWR) eventually in return for a verified freeze in its nuclear weapons program). Assuming that Kelly's proof would, at a minimum, end the fuel oil deliveries and halt the LWR construction anyway, the North may have decided to create a new crisis in hopes of reaching a new agreement, under

which they would again be compensated for not doing what they were not supposed to be doing in the first place.

Officials in Seoul have another (more polite) way of saying this, speculating that the North's confession "may be a sign that it wants to resolve the problem through negotiations rather than confrontation." To this end, local press reports also cite unidentified ROK officials as saying that the North offered Washington a deal to barter U.S. guarantees for its survival in return for resolving U.S. concerns regarding the North's weapons of mass destruction. Given the ROK media's tendency to report rumor as fact, however, this should be taken with a large grain of salt.

ROK officials are understandably concerned -what's good for the soul has not been good for Seoul. President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy of engagement with the North had already been under attack for being too trusting (and generous) toward the North; "suspicions confirmed" has been the outcry from the opposition, with all presidential candidates (including the one from the ruling party) demanding the North comply with its promises and abandon its nuclear ambitions. Throughout the country, people are confused by the North's confession, especially in light of its recent more friendly behavior toward the South. This is particularly true here in Busan, which is still basking in the glow of hosting this year's Asian Games, which included a team of athletes and even a cheering squad from North Korea, raising renewed hopes of genuine reconciliation.

Many have also tied the North Korean action, in one way or another, to Iraq. Perhaps the North decided to come out of the closet now because it believed the Bush administration was so preoccupied with Iraq that it would have to accept Pyongyang's actions. Or, more credibly, perhaps Washington's presumed determination to strike Iraq before it develops nuclear weapons caused Pyongyang to claim that it has them in order to deter Washington for picking on North Korea next. On this point it is worth noting that it is still unclear exactly what the North acknowledged having - a secret program for developing nuclear weapons or the actual weapons themselves. One report also claims that North Korean officials said they "have more powerful things as well," causing speculation about possible biological weapons, while the North's possession of chemical weapons has been an open secret for years.

One person I talked to even speculated that there was some conspiracy between Pyongyang and Washington behind the announcement. South Koreans are world-class conspiracy theorists, although this one stretched the limits. And, of course, there are those who wonder if the North really did confess or if there wasn't a "secret offer" that Washington is still withholding, such as the grand bargain described above.

Its reputation as a trigger-happy unilateral cowboy notwithstanding, the Bush administration's response to the crisis has been measured, non-threatening (to date), and taken in full

consultation with Tokyo and Seoul. President Bush has called the North's confession "troubling, sobering news" but has expressed his determination to address the issue through diplomatic channels. "We seek a peaceful solution," he said. One would have thought that this would have gained Washington a few rounds of applause. Instead, it raised questions as to why the administration was revealing all this now rather than the more logical question of why the North seemed to be precipitating another crisis.

All eyes will now be on the planned Oct. 26 Bush-Kim-Koizumi summit meeting along the sidelines of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Mexico, to see if the three leaders will be able to speak with one voice in charting a clear path toward bringing North Korea back into full compliance with its own earlier agreements, hopefully without resorting to forceful measures. This topic will also (rightfully) become a central theme in future Japan-DPRK negotiations, scheduled to resume in Kuala Lumpur at the end of the month, and should be high on Seoul's list in its own negotiations with Pyongyang.

*Ralph A. Cossa is President of the Pacific Forum CSIS.*