



## North Korea Delegations: Good Intentions, Bad Idea

by Ralph A. Cossa

Some unsolicited advice to professors, congressmen, former ambassadors and other ex-diplomats, and anyone seeking a Nobel Peace Prize nomination: if you really want to help resolve the nuclear standoff on the Korean Peninsula, stay home!

Such delegations are always well-intentioned, but then again, they say “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” What they generally are not is very helpful in actually resolving the crisis. True, former President Jimmy Carter’s mission to Pyongyang in 1994 did help save the day, moving the Clinton administration and Kim Il-Sung (father of North Korea’s current leader, Kim Jong-il) back from the brink of sanctions and possibly war. But this is not 1994 and recent delegation heads, competent as they might be, fall short of Carter’s prestige, clout, and capabilities.

This week’s planned delegation, headed by Stanford professor emeritus John Lewis (a genuinely sincere scholar for whom I have the highest regard) and including former diplomat Jack Pritchard (who no doubt means well but should know better) may – or may not – also visit the North Korean nuclear complex at Yongbyon, where reprocessing of spent fuel rods has reportedly taken place. Even with the former director of Los Alamos Labs, Dr. Sigfried Hecker, in the entourage, it is questionable just what the group may be able to ascertain or confirm, if they indeed make this side trip (North Korea has yet to confirm that this excursion will be allowed). But even if they return with an intelligence coup, the potential diplomatic damage that can be done will likely far outweigh any potential benefits derived from the trip.

Like earlier trips by Congressman Curt Weldon (who apparently wants to go again, despite President Bush’s obvious annoyance over his last trip) and former ambassador to South Korea Don Gregg, the end result is likely to be counterproductive. At best, North Korea uses such trips to play rival political factions in the U.S. against one another while also trying to drive a deeper wedge between Washington and its other dialogue partners (Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, and Moscow) over how best to proceed in dealing with North Korea. The current delegation may also create false illusions in North Korea about alternative ways out of its current dilemma other than returning to the Six-Party Talks (which it recently agreed to do “in principle” but not at any set date). It will also interfere with the efforts of, if not alienate, the people tasked with actually solving this problem; i.e., Bush administration State Department diplomats.

Whether or not you agree with the administration’s approach toward North Korea, it is plain to see that we are at a sensitive juncture in trying to get Pyongyang back to the negotiating table while also maintaining one voice in

demanding that there must be a “full, verifiable, irreversible” end to North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. If all the Lewis delegation was going to do was to reinforce this message – like a recent European delegation did – at least it would do no harm. But, if the end result is to make new suggestions – Weldon went as far as presenting his own plan for solving the crisis – this will at a minimum complicate, and could potentially delay or undermine, the careful diplomatic effort that has gotten us to where we are today.

As long as North Korea sees the opportunity to drive new wedges or create more mischief, it is unlikely to sit down and negotiate away its nuclear weapons program. Creating new delays or diversions merely plays into the hands of those in Washington – and their numbers are strong and growing – who see no value in pursuing the diplomatic option in the first place. Private diplomacy, especially by those ill-suited to perform such a task, is no substitute for the real thing.

If, in the end, an independent delegation provides necessary, may I suggest (stealing a thought from East-West Center President Charles Morrison) that we select someone more suited to the task and perhaps more likely to be listened to in Pyongyang: Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi. Like North Korea leader Kim Jong-il, he was caught with his hand in the nuclear cookie jar. But, rather than turn confrontational, he decided to come clean – having just witnessed what happened to his neighbor Saddam Hussein may have had something to do with this, Libyan denials to the contrary – and a peaceful dismantlement of Libya’s nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction programs is now underway. Perhaps Gadhafi could talk some sense into Kim Jong-il; it’s doubtful the current U.S. delegation will.

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