

Remarks of Selig S. Harrison at the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment, February 12, 2009.

We're meeting at a very important turning point in US-North Korean relations. For the past 18 years the United States has offered the normalization of relations with North Korea as the reward for denuclearization. Now North Korea is asking us to reverse the sequence, to pursue denuclearization through normalization. They want us to accept them as a nuclear weapons state during a period of transition to normalization and eventual denuclearization.

I'm going to begin by telling you about my recent trip, what was said and who said it. I will then go on to my assessment of the reasons for the shift to a hard line on the nuclear issue and to my analysis of U.S. policy options.

My visit was from January 13 through January 17. I met four key leaders:

- Li Gun, director of U.S. affairs in the foreign ministry and the number two nuclear negotiator, for a total of six hours in his office and over the dinner table.
- Kim Yong Tae, Vice Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, for an hour.
- Foreign Minister Pak Ui Chun, 45 minutes.
- General Ri Chan Bok, spokesman of the National Defense Commission, two hours.

Plus five resident Europeans who have aid and business dealings with the regime and several Korean residents of Beijing and Tokyo who are friendly to the regime, come frequently to Pyongyang and know a lot about what is going on.

The issue dominating discussion of North Korea in Washington is whether North Korea will ever really denuclearize, so I decided to frame my discussion in Pyongyang in a way that would get into this issue, instead of letting the North Koreans take the initiative and frame our discussions in their own terms.

I submitted a detailed proposal for a “Grand Bargain” in advance. North Korea, I suggested, would surrender to the International Atomic Energy Agency the 68 pounds of plutonium already declared in the denuclearization negotiations so far conducted. The United States would conclude a peace treaty ending the Korean War, normalize diplomatic and economic relations, put food and energy aid on a long-term basis and support large-scale multilateral credits for rehabilitation of the North Korean economic infrastructure.

The answer I got was categorical and explicit. I was told that their declared plutonium has “already been weaponized.” They are ready to rule out the development of additional nuclear weapons in future negotiations, they said, but when, and whether, they will give up their already-existing arsenal will depend on how future relations with Washington evolve.

All four of the officials I met emphasized two key themes:

First, North Korea wants friendly relations with the United States and hopes that the Obama Administration will remove all vestiges of the regime change policies of the past and will initiate moves towards normalized relations.

The Vice-President said: “If the Obama Administration takes its first steps correctly and makes a political decision to change its DPRK policy, The DPRK and the United States can become intimate friends.”

I asked General Ri whether U.S. forces could stay in Korea when and if relations are normalized. “When the time comes,” he said, “we can discuss that.”

The second theme emphasized was that North Korea is now a nuclear weapons state and will not commit itself now as to when it will give up its nuclear weapons, regardless of whether or not normal relations are established.

Here are Li Gun’s words: “We are not in a position to say when we will abandon nuclear weapons. That depends on when we believe there is no U.S. nuclear threat. We must proceed step by step, action for action.”

All of those I met said that North Korea has already weaponized the 68 pounds of plutonium acknowledged in its formal declaration and that the weapons cannot be inspected. 68 pounds is enough for four or five nuclear weapons, depending on the grade of plutonium, the specific weapons design and the desired explosive yield. Neither Li Gun nor General Ri would define weaponization but General Ri implied that they are making, or attempting to make missile warheads.

What this means is that the objective of the six-party negotiations should now be to cap the declared North Korean arsenal at four or five weapons by completing the disabling of the Yongbyon reactor now in progress and negotiating the terms for dismantlement.

I was told North Korea would suspend disabling unless the six parties provide the remaining 200,000 tons of fuel oil that Japan has promised as part of the 600,000 tons promised in return for disabling Yongbyon. Japan refuses to provide it so North Korea is slowing down the disabling process and threatens to suspend the October 3 dismantling agreement altogether unless the Obama administration takes action soon. They have already slowed down the discharge of fuel rods to 15 a day and they threaten to slow down to one a day. And there are still 2,200 fuel rods to be discharged.

The very first thing Li Gun said to me was this: “The primary task of the Obama administration regarding Korea should be to complete the October 3 agreement by persuading Japan to supply its share of heavy fuel oil or by making arrangements with China, South Korea and Russia to provide it. If it is not provided, we will not be bound to proceed with disablement.”

Assuming that Yongbyon is in fact disabled, the next step envisaged in the October 3 agreement is to dismantle it. That should be our priority in order to cap the North Korean arsenal at four or five nuclear weapons. But in return for dismantlement North Korea wants a binding commitment to complete the two light water reactors for electricity promised under the 1994 Agreed Framework. And it wants interim energy aid until the reactors are in operation. That is sure to stir up controversy in Washington. But in Pyongyang it seems logical. First because the reactors were promised. Second because nearly \$3 billion has already been spent on them and, above all, because North Korea suspended its nuclear weapons program from 1994 until 2002 in return for that promise.

What about the verification issue that led to the breakdown of negotiations last December? I was told that verification could begin in parallel with the dismantling process. The six parties can take samples at nuclear waste sites to determine whether there is more plutonium hidden away in addition to the 68 pounds. Li Gun said: “We are already a nuclear weapons state, so why would we object to sampling?”

But there is a big condition for sampling within North Korea and that is verification inspections in South Korea by the Denuclearization Working Group of the six party talks. First, the U.S. would have to make a declaration listing in detail the nuclear weapons brought into South Korea and when they were removed. Here’s what General Ri said: “The U.S. said in 1991 that it removed them, but we have no way of knowing whether that is true or not. Just as you wanted a declaration from us, we want one from you. We will have to verify the declaration with inspections at U.S. bases and, if necessary, at South Korean bases. We also have to inspect whether there are still nuclear mines at the DMZ.”

Li Gun emphasized that the chairmen of all the six party delegations including the U.S adopted a resolution announced by China on July 12, 2008, saying that verification would cover the entire peninsula.

To sum up, North Korea has suddenly adopted a much harder line than before and the question is why. Some say it’s just a bargaining posture to strengthen its position with a new administration, but I would emphasize two other factors.

First, Kim Jong Il did have a stroke. It’s not officially acknowledged and when I cited the statement by a French neurosurgeon who treated him, Dr. François-Xavier Roux, in *Le Figaro*, that was dismissed as a “fabrication.” But I learned from several well-informed sources that he has a greatly

reduced work schedule. He has turned over day to day management of domestic affairs to his brother in law, Chang Song Taek, and foreign affairs and defense policy is now largely in the hands of hawks in the National Defense Commission.

A second factor of great importance is the fundamental change in the posture of South Korea toward the North under its new President Lee Myung Bak. President Lee said he is not bound by the North-South summit declarations of June, 2000, and October, 2007 and would “review” them. This was a disastrous, historic mistake. The summit declarations greatly reduced North Korean fears that South Korea wants to absorb the North. That’s what the sunshine policies of Kim Dae Jang and Roh Moo Hyun meant to North Korea. What Lee Myung Bak has done is to revive North Korean fears that South Korea, the United States and Japan want regime change and absorption. They’re especially sensitive about this with Kim Jong Il ill. So to make progress in the nuclear negotiations and avoid a revival of military tensions in the Korean peninsula it’s necessary for both the U.S. and South Korea to reaffirm their categorical, unqualified support of the June, 2000 and October, 2007 summit declarations.

In conclusion, the bottom line in shaping North Korea policy is that continued U.S. engagement with North Korea will strengthen the pragmatists in Pyongyang in their continuing struggle with military hard-liners. If the United States can deal with major nuclear weapons states like China and Russia in East Asia, it can tolerate a nuclear-armed North Korea that may, or may not, actually have the nuclear weapons arsenal it says it has. Just in case it has, in fact, learned to miniaturize nuclear warheads sufficiently to make long-range missiles, the new administration should couple a resumption of denuclearization negotiations with a revival of the promising missile limitation negotiations that the Clinton Administration was about to conclude when it left office. I pushed this idea hard and after

overnight consultations, Li Gun said, “If we can have nuclear negotiations, why not missile negotiations?”