

*Testimony of Selig S. Harrison, Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and Director, Asia Program, Center for International Policy, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, June 17, 2009*

This is a very dangerous moment in our relations with North Korea, the most dangerous since June, 1994, when Jimmy Carter went to Pyongyang with the grudging consent of the Clinton Administration. Carter negotiated an agreement with Kim Il Sung that headed off a war and paved the way for the suspension of the North Korean nuclear weapons program for the next eight years. Now we urgently need another high-level emissary, but the Obama Administration is not even prepared to give its grudging consent to Al Gore, who wants to negotiate the release of the two imprisoned U.S. journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee, both employees of Current TV, which he founded, and who could in the process pave the way for a reduction of tensions.

As members of this Committee may know, Al Gore met Hillary Clinton on May 11 and asked for the cooperation of the Administration in facilitating a mission to Pyongyang and in empowering him to succeed in such a mission by exploring with him ways in which the present stalemate in relations between North Korea and the United States can be broken. She said she would “consider” his request, but the Administration has subsequently delayed action. The Administration’s position is that the case of the two imprisoned journalists is a “humanitarian” matter and must be kept separate from the political and security issues between the two countries. In a News Hour interview with U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice on June 10, Margaret Warner asked Rice how the latest U.N. sanctions resolution would “complicate efforts to win the release of the two American journalists.” But Rice turned the question around, declaring that the issue of the two journalists “cannot be allowed to complicate our efforts to hold North Korea accountable” for its nuclear and missile tests.

This is an unrealistic position. It shows a callous disregard for the welfare of Laura Ling and Euna Lee. It ignores the danger of a war resulting from the Administration’s naïve attempts to pressure North Korea into abandonment of its nuclear and missile programs. Past experience with North Korea has repeatedly shown that pressure invariably provokes a retaliatory response that makes matters worse. The Administration should instead actively pursue the release of the two women through intervention in their behalf by a high-level unofficial emissary empowered to signal U.S. readiness for tradeoffs leading to the reduction of tensions, such as the provision of the 200,000 tons of oil that had been promised to North Korea, but had not been provided, when the six-party talks broke off last fall. This was one third of the energy aid promised in return for the disablement of the Yongbyon reactor.

Looking ahead, the goal of the United States should be to cap the North Korean nuclear arsenal at its existing level and to move toward normalized relations as the necessary precondition for progress toward eventual denuclearization. The prospects for capping the arsenal at its present level have improved as result of Pyongyang’s June 13 announcement admitting that it has an R and D program for uranium enrichment. Since

this program is in its early stages, and it is not yet actually enriching uranium, there is time for the United States to negotiate inspection safeguards limiting enrichment to the levels necessary for civilian uses. Until now, North Korea's denial of an R and D program has kept the uranium issue off the negotiating table and kept alive unfounded suspicions that it is capable of making weapons-grade uranium.

Progress toward denuclearization would require U.S. steps to assure North Korea that it will not be the victim of a nuclear attack. In Article Three, Section One of the Agreed Framework, the United States pledged that it "will provide formal assurances against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the United States" simultaneous with complete denuclearization. Pyongyang is likely to insist on a reaffirmation of this pledge. Realistically, if the United States is unwilling to give up the option of using nuclear weapons against North Korea, it will be necessary to live with a nuclear-armed North Korea while maintaining adequate U.S. deterrent forces in the Pacific.

The President set the tone for a new direction in U.S. relations with the Muslim world in Cairo. He acknowledged the legacy of colonialism in the Middle East, the impact of the Israeli occupation on the Palestinians and the U.S. role in overthrowing the elected Mossadegh regime in Iran. Similarly, he should break through the present poisonous atmosphere by expressing his empathy for the deepest feelings of the Korean people in both the North and the South. Visiting Pyongyang on March 31, 1972, the Reverend Billy Graham declared that "Korean unity was a victim of the cold war." He acknowledged the U.S. role in the division of Korea and he prayed for peaceful reunification "soon." President Obama should declare his support for peaceful reunification through a confederation, as envisioned in the North-South summit pledges of June, 2000, and October, 2007, in order to set to rest North Korean fears that the United States will join with right-wing elements in Japan and South Korea now seeking reunification by promoting the collapse of the North Korean regime. Above all, he should express his empathy for the painful memories of Japanese colonialism shared by all Koreans. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton demonstrated complete insensitivity to these memories during her Tokyo visit on February 18, 2009 by needlessly embroiling herself in the explosive abductee dispute between North Korea and Japan and by ignoring Kim Jong Il's apology to Prime Minister Koizumi on September 17, 2002. This is a bilateral dispute and, to paraphrase Susan Rice, "should not be allowed to complicate" the reduction of tensions with Pyongyang.

In the event of another war with North Korea resulting from efforts to enforce the U.N. sanctions, it is Japan that North Korea would attack, in my view, not South Korea, because nationalistic younger generals with no experience of the outside world are now in a strong position in the North Korean leadership following Kim Jong Il's illness and his reduced role in day to day management. Some of them, I learned in Pyongyang, were outraged at Kim Jong Il's apology to Koizumi and have alarmed others in the regime with their unrealistic assessments of North Korea's capabilities in the event of a conflict with Japan.

The U.N. sanctions have further strengthened their position because all North Koreans feel that they face a threat from the U.S. nuclear weapons deployed near their borders and would be united, in my view, if tensions resulting from attempts to enforce the sanctions should escalate to war.

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*In the last week of May, 1972, Harrison, representing The Washington Post, and Harrison Salisbury of the New York Times became the first Americans to visit North Korea since the Korean war and to interview Kim Il Sung. In 1989, Harrison presided over a Carnegie Endowment symposium that brought together North Korean spokesmen and American specialists and officials for the first time and has reported on this meeting in his Endowment study, Dialogue with North Korea. In 1992, he led a Carnegie Endowment delegation to Pyongyang that learned for the first time that North Korea had reprocessed plutonium.*

*In June, 1994, on his fourth visit, he met the late Kim Il Sung for three hours and won agreement to the concept of a freeze and eventual dismantlement of the North Korean nuclear program in exchange for U.S. political and economic concessions. President Carter, meeting Kim Il Sung a week later, persuaded the North Korean leader to initiate the freeze immediately, opening the way for negotiations with the U.S. that resulted in the U.S.-North Korean nuclear agreement of October 21, 1994.*