

Bill Clinton's visit to North Korea: a tactical shift in US foreign policy

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In a move that surprised the world, former US President Bill Clinton arrived in North Korea Tuesday to broker the release of two American journalists detained since March. Described by the Obama administration as a private mission, the visit actually signalled Washington's desire to put aside North Korea's nuclear crisis in order to prepare for a confrontation with Iran.

In response to the US-Japan backed United Nations condemnation of its April 5 test launch of a long-range missile, North Korea declared its intention to pull out of the six-party talks involving the US, China, Japan, Russia and the two Koreas. Pyongyang carried out a second nuclear test on May 25, resulting in a tougher UN resolution. As recently as the ASEAN summit in Thailand last month, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the wife of Bill Clinton, harshly attacked North Korea for allegedly supplying nuclear and missile materials to the Burmese junta.

Within hours of Clinton's meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that Kim had issued an order "granting a special pardon" to the two US journalists, Euna Lee and Laura Ling. They have been sentenced to 12 years in a labour camp after being captured in March on the Chinese-North Korean border, where they had been trying to report on North Korean refugees. The two journalists were released and departed from Pyongyang on Clinton's plane Wednesday.

The KCNA reported that Clinton carried a message from President Obama, but White House spokesman Robert Gibbs denied the claim. He insisted it was "a private mission" for humanitarian purposes only. In order to separate Clinton's trip from the Obama administration's official policy on North Korea, no current government officials travelled with the ex-president. And Clinton was travelling in a privately chartered jet, not a government plane.

In reality, Clinton's visit was the result of secretive negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang. With no advance notice to the world, the Obama administration agreed to send Clinton to North Korea a month ago, at the special request of Pyongyang, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. "Current and former US officials said Tuesday they believed Kim Jong Il was seeking to turn back the clock and resurrect a relationship with Mr. Clinton that came close to formally ending the Korean War in late 2000," the *Journal* reported.

Among those accompanying Clinton was his former White House chief of staff John Podesta, who also served as Obama's transition chief. Among the top North Korean officials receiving Clinton at the airport was Kim Kye-kwan, the country's chief nuclear negotiator in the six-party talks.

The political objective of Clinton's trip was to prepare the

conditions for North Korea to return to some kind of negotiation with the US, thereby putting aside Pyongyang's "nuclear crisis", at least for now.

The Obama administration's priority in terms of US foreign policy is to exploit the divisions within the Iranian regime. The past week has seen US threats to cut exports of refined petroleum to Iran, in order to pressure Tehran to stop its nuclear program and to increase political instability within the country in the hope of bringing to power a section of the Iranian elite prepared to offer closer cooperation with the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

In sending Clinton to Pyongyang for the release of two US journalists, Washington was also sending a message to Tehran—which also detained three Americans on the Iran-Iraq borders last week—that the US is open to talks. Another possible consideration is that of weakening Chinese and Russian opposition to tough sanctions against Iran's nuclear program on the UN Security Council. By signalling a more moderate approach, Washington may hope to win a more favourable response from Beijing and Moscow at the UN.

While the Obama administration has continued the Bush presidency's policy of engaging North Korea only through the six-party talks, Washington has clearly been offering limited concessions to Pyongyang. Kurt Campbell, the US assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, was in Seoul in July to discuss the so-called "two-track" approach to Pyongyang. While he insisted on "putting in place a series of actions ... that are designed to put more pressure on North Korea," he said the US was also offering a "comprehensive package" if North Korea would give up its nuclear program.

On July 24, North Korea's ambassador to the UN, Sin Sun-ho, held a rare press conference to announce that Pyongyang was interested in direct talks with the Obama administration on "common concerns". According to South Korea's *JoongAng Daily*, a South Korean official last week declared that the US and North Korea had struck a deal to grant amnesty to release the two American reporters. "It was just a matter of who will visit North Korea and when," the source reportedly said.

The *Washington Post* Tuesday cited a source involved in planning Clinton's trip to North Korea who said that the Obama administration had initially chosen former Vice President Al Gore, who co-founded the San Francisco-based Current TV channel that employed the two American journalists.

Pyongyang, however, wanted a more prestigious figure, in order to use his presence to express its desire for normalising relations with the US and to shore up the fragile regime of Kim Jong-il before the North Korean masses. With Kim having reportedly suffered a stroke last

year, the question of succession looms large in Pyongyang. Amid a deepening economic crisis, this can lead to political instability.

Clinton is the highest level US political figure to visit North Korea since former US President Jimmy Carter went there in 1994 after the Clinton administration pushed the Korean Peninsula to the brink of full-scale war over Pyongyang's nuclear program. Clinton backed off, only after he was informed by US intelligence of the huge physical destruction and casualties that would result from a new Korean war.

Carter's "unofficial" trip laid the basis for the Agreed Framework between Pyongyang and the Clinton administration. Pyongyang agreed to dismantle its plutonium-based reactor at Yongbyon in exchange for two light-water reactors, security guarantees and normalisation of diplomatic relations with Washington.

US-North Korean relations reached a high point in the following years, culminating in former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's historic visit to Pyongyang in 2000. Then North Korea's second highest military commander, Jo Myong-rok, visited Washington and signed a memorandum of understanding calling for an official end of hostilities on the Korean Peninsula, where the US still maintains a large number of troops in South Korea. Former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung also unveiled his famous "Sunshine policy" to economically engage North Korea, winning him a Nobel Peace Prize.

In fact, the tactical shift on North Korea under Clinton was bound up with the growing emphasis within American ruling circles on the need to establish strategic dominance of Central Asia, the Caspian Basin and other areas in the heartland of the Eurasian continent. Having taken steps toward a so-called peace on the Korean Peninsula, Clinton waged a neo-colonial war against Serbia in 1999.

However, the Agreed Framework never delivered the two promised light-water reactors to North Korea, a concession that was opposed by right-wing Republicans. The deal was virtually frozen as soon as Bush came into office in 2001. In 2002, Bush scrapped the deal, under the pretext that North Korea was secretly developing a separate uranium enrichment program. That move came after Bush's naming of North Korea as part of the "axis of evil"—together with Iran and Iraq—and led to escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea pulled out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003 and restarted the process of extracting plutonium from spent fuel rods.

At the same time, the Bush administration turned to the China-hosted six-party talks to keep the pressure on North Korea, as Washington prepared the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The pretext to invade Iraq was Saddam Hussein's supposed "weapons of mass destruction", which never existed, even as North Korea openly declared it was intending to produce nuclear weapons. This anomaly is explained by the fact that North Korea is strategically far less important in terms of US imperialism's struggle for global dominance than the oil-rich Middle East. Moreover, Washington has become economically dependent on North Korea's key ally, China.

The six-party negotiations were long and difficult, primarily because the Bush administration insisted on various additional demands such as verification of North Korea's de-nuclearisation procedures. In September 2005, just when a deal similar to the Agreed Framework was reached, the six-party talks broke down as the US Treasury Department effectively froze some \$US25 million in North Korean assets held in the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia. Ultimately, North Korea was forced to carry out its first nuclear test in October 2006, in order to pressure Washington to make concessions.

In February 2007, the deal was revived as North Korea agreed to

take initial steps to freeze and disable its nuclear facilities in exchange for energy assistance and negotiations with the US to normalise relations. Although both the US and China are concerned about a nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia, particularly the prospect of Japan developing nuclear weapons, it was not North Korea's nuclear test that forced the Bush administration to back down.

The Bush administration was stepping up pressure on Iran, amid intensive discussions of a possible military strike against the country. The deal with North Korea was largely aimed at buying time for Washington as it focussed on Iran. Before the end of the Bush presidency, the six-party talks broke down again in December 2008, as the US imposed additional demands for verification, even as North Korea had shut down the Yongbyon reactor and taken the initial steps to disable it. In order to force the new Obama administration to make concessions, Pyongyang again turned to its only bargaining chip—its nuclear and missile programs.

For all the talk of North Korea's failure to fulfil its promises of abandoning its nuclear program, the record since the 1990s shows that it is the US government—under both Democrat and Republican—that is responsible for North Korea's "nuclear crisis". Pyongyang's nuclear program is a convenient pretext for the US to ratchet up tensions in Northeast Asia, justifying its ongoing heavy military presence in South Korea and Japan, which can be used against its great-power rivals, especially China. Clinton's supposed diplomatic coup in Pyongyang is only a tactical move, which can be reversed quickly, depending upon Washington's immediate needs in its bid to maintain its global hegemony.

Already, the most militaristic elements in the US ruling circles are attacking Clinton's visit. Bush's UN ambassador, John Bolton, declared: "This is a reward for hostage-taking. Will Bill be off to Tehran next to get those backpackers out?"



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