

North Korea releases two jailed Americans

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The North Korean regime freed two jailed American citizens—Kenneth Bae and Matthew Miller—on November 8 after Washington sent Director of National Intelligence James Clapper to Pyongyang for talks and to bring them back.

Bae and Miller had been held since November 2012 and April 2014 respectively. Bae was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor on allegations of propagating Christianity. Miller was arrested at the airport in Pyongyang, after, according to the regime, tearing up his visa, saying he wanted to investigate conditions inside North Korea's prisons. He received a six-year sentence.

Their release came less than three weeks after that of a third prisoner, Jeffery Fowle who was arrested but not tried for leaving a Korean/English Bible in the bathroom of a nightclub for foreign sailors. Following Fowle's release, North Korea relayed a message to the US that it was willing to release Bae and Miller, if a high-level official was sent to retrieve them.

The three Americans have been nothing more than pawns in the maneuvers of the US and North Korea. Pyongyang used them as bargaining chips in its bid to ease tensions with Washington. Likewise, the US cared little for the fate of three men and exploited their imprisonment to apply more pressure on North Korea.

The decision to send intelligence chief Clapper to North Korea was a significant break from the previous practice of sending former US officials, including Presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter. On his return, Clapper said Pyongyang had asked for a current US official to be sent, and one with national security credentials.

Clearly Pyongyang was looking for a diplomatic step forward. Clapper told the US media that he met with the North Korean minister of state security and other officials. But “they were disappointed, frankly, that I didn't have some breakthrough.” Instead, Clapper

handed over a short letter from President Obama describing the release of the two Americans as “a positive gesture.”

Virtually nothing has been said about the content of the exchanges that took place. However, the dispatch of such a high-ranking US official indicates that more was discussed than the release of the two Americans.

Joseph DeTrani, former senior advisor to Clapper, stated: “The director of national intelligence was just the right person for this.” North Korea wanted to “come out of the penalty box,” he said. “They are going through a bad patch. The last two years have been a disaster. They are more and more of an isolated state. We're seeing an outreach—the leadership in Pyongyang is saying, ‘we've got to change course, it's not working’.”

In April 2012, DeTrani led a secret mission to North Korea to feel out the country's leadership following North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011. DeTrani now heads the Intelligence and National Security Alliance (INSA), a think tank that boasts current and former high-ranking intelligence and military personnel as members. Washington sent a second secret envoy to North Korea in August 2012.

Since taking office in 2009, Obama has adopted the same carrot-and-stick approach to North Korea as he has to other “rogue states” like Iran and Burma—offering the possibility of a rapprochement but at the same time making heavy demands and threatening sanctions and military attack.

Obama refused to restart six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear program and has used it as the pretext for a military build-up in North East Asia against China. Via Obama's “pivot to Asia,” the US is moving 60 percent of its naval and air forces to the Asia Pacific by 2020. Under the guise of countering the “North Korean threat,” the Pentagon is expanding US anti-ballistic missile systems, including in Japan and South

Korea, as part of its preparations for fighting a nuclear war with China.

Intense US pressure has compounded the political crisis in Pyongyang, which relies on China for trade and financial assistance in the face of a US-led economic blockade. Sections of the North Korean regime have close ties with the country's only ally, China, while others are looking for a means of opening up to foreign investors.

Last December's execution of Jang Song-thaek, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's uncle, pointed to the inner political turmoil. Jang was the number 2 man in Pyongyang, with close ties to Beijing. He was charged with a long list of crimes, including "such acts of treachery as selling off precious resources of the country at cheap prices"—that is, to China.

The emerging capitalist class in North Korea has also voiced complaints over the country's isolation from international markets. Hong Se-bong, the head of a clothing plant in North Korea's Rason special economic zone on the Chinese/Russian border, told the *Nikkei Asian Review*: "We are now shipping most of our products to China. But if obstructions are removed, we could directly export to South Korea or Japan."

North Korea has announced 14 special economic zones throughout the country to attract foreign investment with ultra-cheap labor. The average wage in Rason is \$US78 a month, far below even the lowest wage just across the border in China's Jilin Province. However, without the green light from Washington, investing in North Korea remains a risky business.

North Korea appears to have put out tentative feelers to the US and its allies to ease tensions. Kim Jong-un invited former NBA basketball star Dennis Rodman to North Korea in 2013 and 2014 to stage exhibition matches. More recently, Pyongyang sent high-ranking officials to observe the closing ceremonies of the 2014 Asian Games in South Korea, where talks were held with their Seoul counterparts.

The Obama administration clearly wants more than gestures, however. In all likelihood, Clapper reiterated the long list of US demands to North Korean officials—the prime one being a move by Pyongyang away from China.

The US is continuing to heap the pressure on North Korea. A UN General Assembly committee voted this week to recommend that Kim Jong-un and other senior

North Korean officials be tried in the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. The move is the latest step by the US and its allies to ramp up the "human rights" campaign against North Korea.

The rank hypocrisy involved is underscored by the ease with which Burma was transformed in the space of months in 2011 from being a "rogue state" to a "developing democracy" once the military junta bowed to US demands.

Pyongyang has responded angrily to the UN vote, threatening to conduct a fourth nuclear test. As in the past, the US will undoubtedly exploit such a test not only to ratchet up tensions with North Korea, but to justify a further military build-up directed against China.



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