

Private US Visit to North Korea's Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center

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North Korea appears intent upon increasing the pressure on the Bush Administration either to agree to a second round of Six Party Talks or to reveal its plans to resolve the impasse over North Korea's nuclear ambitions. According to January 2, 2004 press reports, North Korea has invited six Americans to visit its Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center has the week of January 5. No foreigners have visited the center since International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors were expelled from it in December 2002.

Pyongyang apparently hopes the invitation will demonstrate to the international community that it is willing to open its nuclear facilities to international observers. North Korea probably also hopes that the American visitors will confirm North Korea's claims that it has begun extracting plutonium from the spent nuclear fuel stored at its primary nuclear facility. Even if the visitors are able to enter the Yongbyon center, it is doubtful that they will be able determine whether and how much plutonium North Korea has reprocessing over the past year. Nor does the Bush Administration appear inclined to react positively to the visit.

The Visitors

The Bush Administration has denied any official linkage to the group, and labeled it "entirely private." However, the Bush Administration and Department of State certainly has known about the group's intentions for sometime. North Korea's invitation apparently merges two separate groups of Americans, one formed by Senate Foreign Relations Committee staffers and another by Dr. Carl Lewis of Stanford University.

The congressional staff group consists of former Ambassador and current Brookings Institute fellow Jack Pritchard, a retired US Army Colonel who served in the National Security Council under the Clinton Administration and then as the US government representative to the Korea Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) in the current Bush Administration. Long disgruntled with the administration, he resigned his position last summer. The other two are Frank Januzzi and Keith Luse, both staff aides to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Frank Januzzi worked in the Department of States Bureau of Intelligence and Research as a political analyst before moving to Congress in 1996. They maintain frequent contact with North Korea's mission to the United Nations. Both last visited North Korea in September 2003, right after the conclusion of the first round of Six Party Talks. At that time they unsuccessfully attempted to arrange for the influential Republican Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Richard Lugar, and his Democratic deputy Senator Biden to visit North Korea.

The apparent organizer of the Stanford University group is Dr. Carl Lewis, an expert in disarmament issues and professor at the university. He is well known to North Korea's foreign ministry because of his past invitations to North Korean diplomats to participate in seminars at Stanford. Accompanying him are Sig Hecker, former director of U.S. Los Alamos National Laboratory in the 1980s and 1990s and a professor from Stanford University.

Pyongyang's Intentions

North Korea probably hopes that the visit will confirm to the international community the credibility of Pyongyang's repeated claims that it has developed a nuclear capability. North Korea has claimed over the past year that it has removed its 8,000 nuclear spent fuel rods from storage and completed the extraction of plutonium from them. Plutonium is useful only in the making of a nuclear weapon. Confirmation could intensify concerns in Beijing, Moscow, Seoul, and some European Union members that North Korea has become, or at least is very close to becoming a nuclear power. Pyongyang may hope that these nations might pressure the United States to demonstrate greater flexibility, particularly regarding security assurances and timing for extending them. Resolution of these issues would quicken the pace of progress toward a negotiated settlement at the Six Party Talks

Pyongyang's invitation suggests that it prefers to negotiate an end to its nuclear program, albeit on its own terms. It probably hopes that other participants in the Six Party Talks, except for Japan, will conclude that further foot dragging by Washington will compel North Korea to complete the building of nuclear weapons, and also give it more time to build a nuclear arsenal. Washington is willing to give North Korea security assurances. But it insists that North Korea first publicly declare its intention to give up its nuclear ambitions and to "irrevocably and verifiably" dismantle all of its nuclear weapons programs. Pyongyang prefers a "simultaneous exchange" with Washington, its no-nuclear pledge in exchange for multilateral security assurances.

What Can Be Confirmed?

The visit will be of limited value to the international community. It could enable the Americans to confirm whether Yongbyon's 5 megawatt nuclear reactor has been operated in recent months, per Pyongyang's claims. This, however, would not be a new revelation since the United States intelligence community already has ample proof that this has occurred over the past year. By visiting the spent fuel storage facility, the building next to the 5 Megawatt reactor building, the visitors can determine whether the 8,000 spent fuel rods have been removed from this storage facility for possible extraction of plutonium. This would be an important revelation since no foreigners have visited the facility since the IAEA left North Korea one year ago.

It will be more difficult, probably impossible, for the visitors to confirm whether North Korea has reprocessed any or all of its spent fuel rods. This would require a visit to Yongbyon's Radio Chemical Laboratory, North Korea's name for its reprocessing

plant. No foreigners, other than IAEA inspectors, have been allowed to do this. Even if the visitors are able to enter this facility, they will not be able to determine the extent of reprocessing without collecting samples of highly radio active nuclear waste material for later analysis. North Korea is certain to prohibit any collection of sample.

Who Gains?

The Americans' offer to visit Yongbyon posed a dilemma for Pyongyang. Had the visit been denied, many North Korea watchers would have concluded that North Korea was hiding the truth about its claims of having reprocessed nuclear fuel. Allowing the visit suggests North Korea is not hiding the truth, at least regarding the removal of its spent fuel from storage. But the visit will not be able to determine what North Korea has done with its spent fuel rods. If the rods are not at the usual storage facility, this could merely mean that they have been moved to another location. If the visit takes place, the visitors will at least be able to gain some insight into what the North Koreans have been up to at the nuclear facility since IAEA inspectors left. But such gains are not likely to be crucial given what the US government already knows. The visitors' inability to resolve the international community's gravest concern - whether North Korea has a nuclear capability - greatly diminishes the visit's significance.

North Korea loses nothing. On the contrary, it gains. It will have demonstrated a willingness to open its nuclear facility to outsiders and thus its preference to pursue a "peaceful negotiated" end to its nuclear weapons program. As for the Six Party Talks, the visit's impact is most likely to be of temporary and marginal significance.