

Mr. Kim – You Can't Buy Love, or Respect!

By

Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones
Former North Korea Affairs Director
U.S. Department of State

For
The Chosun Ilbo
June 24, 2005

North Korean leader Kim Jong Il is a masterful director of drama. For many months he has assured the world that North Korea will rejoin the Six Party Talks with Beijing, Moscow, Seoul, Tokyo and Washington. Yet whether and when remains a mystery. Most recently, he repeated this promise to South Korean Unification Minister Chong at a June 17 meeting in Pyongyang, but again added only after Washington demonstrated respect for Chairman Kim and his government.

Frankly speaking, this pledge is old wine in an old bottle with a new label. Pyongyang for a year has proclaimed its “principled position is to return to the Six Party Talks” once the United States has “dropped its hostile policy” toward North Korea. On June 17, Mr. Kim merely substituted “respect” for “hostile policy.”

North Korea since January 2005 has attempted to compel the United States to “respect and treat it as a friend.” US Congressman Curt Weldon, at Pyongyang’s behest, delivered this message to the Bush Administration in mid-January. But then newly designated Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice labeled North Korea an “outpost of tyranny.” Pyongyang fired back on February 10 by declaring itself a “nuclear state” and threatened not to return to the Six Party Talks until Dr. Rice apologized and withdrew her comment.

The squabbling intensified. When Rice rejected Pyongyang’s demand, North Korea on March 2 warned, “The U.S. had better behave realistically and wisely if it truly wishes to have the six-party talks.” Secretary Rice stood firm, but softened her rhetoric, at Seoul’s request, by referring to North Korea as an “independent sovereign state.” Pyongyang’s grumbling intensified after President Bush at an April 28 press conference referred to Chairman Kim as a “dangerous” person who “starves his people while building nuclear weapons.”

Both sides restrained their rhetoric after their diplomats convened a “New York channel” on May 13. In an uncharacteristic move, Washington offered olive branches to induce Pyongyang back to the Six Party Talks. It confirmed that it “had no intention to attack North Korea” and affirmed respect for North Korea’s sovereignty. Equally important, Washington promised to reopen the “New York channel” for substantive bilateral diplomatic dialogue – which had been virtually closed for six months – and pledged to engage in direct bilateral diplomatic discussions with North Korea when it returned to the

Six Party Talks. As a further enticement, President Bush on May 31 referred to “Mr. Kim Jong Il,” a rare expression of politeness toward North Korea’s leader.

Mr. Kim then dropped the ball. He kept the Bush Administration waiting for two weeks, and then responded with the equivalent of, “Maybe it would rejoin the talks, but first Washington must demonstrate respect for Chairman Kim Jong Il and his government.” Mr. Kim merely repeated this message to South Korea’s Unification Minister on June 17.

Pyongyang and Washington are caught in a diplomatic spiral that eventually might threaten peace and stability in Northeast Asia. The Bush Administration’s continuing pointed rhetoric has not and will not nurture an atmosphere conducive to the diplomatic dialogue vital for resumption of the Six Party Talks. Nor will it promote progress toward President Bush’s avowed goal of a peaceful diplomatic resolution of the nuclear issue. At the same time, Mr. Kim efforts to gain respect are contradictory and counterproductive. He demands that the Bush Administration demonstrate respect for his nation’s sovereignty, but at the same time expresses a lack of respect for US sovereignty by trying to tell President Bush how to manage his administration.

More worrisome is Mr. Kim’s refusal to recognize that respect cannot be coerced from other nations, just like you cannot buy love. Respect must be earned. In this regard, actions speak louder than words. Actions prove the sincerity of one’s words. Mr. Kim has made many promises to the international community, but his actions have accomplished the opposite. He claims to want a nuclear free Korean Peninsula, but he has broken the decade old South-North Denuclearization Declaration. He pledged not to build nuclear weapons, but withdrew from the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and expelled the International Atomic Energy Agency, then announced that he has built a nuclear arsenal.

Mr. Kim Jong Il understandably yearns for respect from the United States and the international community. But the only way to win respect is to act in a manner consistent with his promises and avowed goals. As a first step, North Korea should promptly return to the Six Party Talks.

Similarly, President Bush should put the national security priorities of the United States and its allies ahead of his preoccupation with morality. Ultimately, morality is a marginal concern. The greater need of the United States, its allies and friends is the preservation of peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia.