

Ambassador Hill's Surprise Visit to Pyongyang – What Does it Mean?

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US Chief Negotiator Christopher Hill's visit to Pyongyang concretely demonstrates to North Korea's Foreign Ministry and Pyongyang's critics of the Six Party Talks that Ambassador Hill finally is able to fulfill his promises. For North Korea, this is more important than getting back the \$25 million from the Banco Delta Alpha. Pyongyang would deem useless continuation of the Six Party Talks if Hill could not keep his promises because of opposition within the Bush Administration, especially if President Bush appeared reluctant to support Hill. After all, why negotiate with a negotiator who could not convince President Bush to approve any future deal that Hill and Kim might formulate?

Hill's June 20-21 visit to Pyongyang fulfilled two promises Hill made to Kim Gye-kwan at the September 2005 round of the Six Party Talks. At that session the Six Parties had agreed on an outline to achieve a peaceful end to North Korea's nuclear program. President Bush, at the US Treasury Department's behest, at the same time froze North Korea's \$25 million account at the Banco Delta Alpha claiming the money had been obtained through illegal activities. This made Hill and the US State Department look foolish and politically feeble.

Ambassador Hill tried to save the Six Party deal, and his "face," by inviting Kim Gye-kwan to New York to discuss the new financial sanctions. Kim was pleased and told journalists the next day about the invitation as he was leaving Beijing for Pyongyang. But Washington had not yet confirmed Hill's invitation to Kim. Bush Administration neo-cons were furious that Hill had acted without consulting them. They promptly blocked the issuance of visas for Kim and his delegation. North Korean diplomats in New York told me this had deeply humiliated Kim and North Korea's Foreign Ministry.

Hill tried to reassure Kim Gye-kwan by offering to visit Pyongyang. I was invited to the State Department to brief officials about what to expect in Pyongyang. But then State Department Under Secretary for International Security Affairs Robert Joseph, a prominent neo-con hardliner and close associate of then US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton, blocked Hill's Pyongyang visit. Joseph, supported by Vice President Chaney and then Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, told Hill that he could not go to Pyongyang unless North Korea shut down its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon.

Pyongyang immediately rejected the proposal and Hill's visit to Pyongyang was shelved.

Then early this year President Bush reversed his approach to Pyongyang. Ever since, Hill has been working to fulfill the promises he made to Kim Gye-kwan in September and October 2005. Only then could he convincingly demonstrate to Pyongyang that he is sincere and has President Bush's support.

When Hill and Kim met in Berlin in January, Hill invited Kim to New York. This time, unlike 2005, Kim and his delegation were promptly issued visas. At their New York meeting, Hill promised to get North Korea's \$25 million dollars unfrozen. This opened the door for the new Six Party Talks accord of February 13, 2007.

But then Hill stumbled badly. He was too optimistic and too confident about his ability to win President Bush's support for getting the money released. His four months of persistent effort finally paid off. Once the money had passed in early June from Banco Delta Alpha through the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank to a Russian bank, Kim Gye-kwan could then fulfill his earlier promise to invite Hill to Pyongyang.

This recent exchange of keeping promises is vital for sustaining the "step by step, action for action" process that Pyongyang insists be used to implement any agreement designed to phase out its nuclear programs. The process was first agreed to between Washington and Pyongyang at talks in February 1994, more than one decade ago. Pyongyang insists this is necessary because it deeply distrusts the United States. It believes this distrust can only be erased slowly through simultaneous actions by both sides.

Hill has now been able to establish his credibility in Pyongyang's eyes. His success augers well for the future of the Six Party Talks. Success will breed more success. Once Pyongyang shuts down its reactor, President Bush will be more likely to support Hill's next steps. Similarly in Pyongyang, Kim Gye-kwan is likely to have greater flexibility in his negotiations with Hill. Subsequently, the two negotiators will be able to convince critics in their respective capitals that real progress is being made toward each side's goals. For Washington, this means ending North Korea's nuclear programs. For Pyongyang, it means ending Washington's "hostile" policy toward it and replacing it with normal diplomatic and commercial relations.

We must be realistic. A single visit to Pyongyang has not resolved everything. The pressure is now on Kim Kye-gwan to fulfill Pyongyang's promise to allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring at the Yongbyon Nuclear facility. This is but one of numerous obstacles that still must be removed before both sides achieve their desired goals. Prospects for eventual success or failure will be assessed in a second article.

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