

## North Korea's "New" Nuclear Site - Fact or Fiction?

By Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones

Published in  
*The Korea Times*  
September 3, 1998

Sensational stories in the American and international press since mid-August have abruptly transformed North Korea from a feeble, impoverished nation on the verge of famine and political collapse into an awesome, secretive, irrational nuclear power. The New York Times on August 17 reported that "Spy satellites have extensively photographed a huge work site 25 miles northeast of Yongbyon", North Korea's nuclear research facility. "Thousands of North Korean workers are swarming around the new site, burrowing into the mountainside, American officials said," the report continued. "Other intelligence," according to the same story, cites unidentified officials as saying that U.S. intelligence analysts told them "they believed that the North intended to build a new (nuclear) reactor and reprocessing center under the mountain."

The U.S. Department of Defense's denial of the story's accuracy has been largely ignored. The press continues repeating the story without assessing its validity. Stories about North Koreans building secret nuclear facilities sell newspapers, not government denials. Some people have gone so far as to pervert the government denials to mean that the report is true, arguing that when the U.S. government denies something, the opposite must be the truth.

All of this poses a potentially precarious situation on the Korean peninsula given the pervasive distrust between South and North Korea. In democratic societies like the U.S. and South Korea, public opinion creates pressure on governments to "do something". But acting on incomplete and inaccurate information could lead to tragic mistakes. The unsubstantiated speculation that has appeared in the international press about North Korea's possible nuclear intentions could even lead to war on the Korean peninsula. So before jumping to any conclusions, we had better check the accuracy of the press reports.

What facts do we have? No one outside the U.S., South and North Korean governments have seen or had access to any credible evidence that North Korea is building a new nuclear facility. The U.S. government has officially denied the

accuracy of the reports. Apparently a U.S. satellite has photographed a large construction site in North Korea. Beyond this, the purpose of the construction project remains unclear.

Press stories citing "intelligence sources" and "satellite photographs" always make exciting, but not necessarily accurate reading. Usually such "intelligence" leaks come from frustrated people in the U.S. government, either or both in the executive and legislative branches of government. These "leakers" seem to think they know better than anyone what is best for national security and foreign policy. To influence foreign policy, they give classified "intelligence" to the press, hoping to pressure the White House and State Department into changing policy by exciting public fear and doubt about present policy. Responsible government officials and intelligence analysts do not do this, so the press only has access to the "frustrated" half of the story, not the responsible point of view.

Actually, the more important story about North Korea's nuclear program may be behind the headlines. This other, quiet story is centered in Washington, not in Pyongyang. It involves America's intelligence community and not North Korea's nuclear program. But before we go any further, who am I to discuss such matters?

### **Living with the Enemy**

As a former Foreign Service Officer, I was closely involved in US-North Korea relations between 1992 and 1997. Between 1992 and 1994, I was the "North Korea desk officer" at the Department of State. I then served on State, Energy and Defense Department delegations sent to North Korea between 1995 and 1997. I frequently met and negotiated with North Koreans, traveled extensively in North Korea and lived and worked there off and on for seven months between. I still meet North Korean government officials at academic conferences, and I plan to visit Pyongyang this fall as the Asia Foundation's representative to Korea.

I first discussed North Korea's nuclear intentions with North Korean diplomats in New York in September 1992 when I met North Korea's Foreign Minister Kim Yong Nam and then Ambassador at Large Kim Gye Gwan, now North Korea's chief negotiator with the U.S. I was the first U.S. diplomat to visit Pyongyang when I went there in 1992. In October 1993, I discussed North Korea's nuclear program over lunch with Kim Il Sung in 1993. I served on the U.S. delegation to the nuclear negotiations with North Korea in New York and Geneva in 1993 and 1994.

In November 1994, only a few days after the U.S. and the DPRK signed the Agreed Framework, I was a member of the first U.S. delegation to visit the DPRK's Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center in November 1994. In January 1995, I took three U.S. Department of Energy scientists to Yongbyon. In the summer of 1995, I negotiated the working arrangements for the U.S. Nuclear Spent Fuel Team which spent the next two and one half years putting North Korea's eight thousand nuclear spent fuel rods in long term, safe storage as required by the Agreed Framework.

Beginning in January 1996, I teamed up with the US Army to negotiate with the Korean People's army. In May 1996, US and North Korean armies agreed to jointly search for and recover the remains of the more than 8,000 American soldiers who died in North Korea and were left behind during the Korean War. The Department of State sent me to live in Pyongyang in the summers of 1996 and 1997 to help foster cooperation between the U.S. Army and the Korean People's Army.

I learned during my thirteen trips to North Korea and travel in five of its provinces that underground construction is quite normal. North Korea military, recalling the intense bombing by the United States during the Korean War, are trying to hide and to protect its most important facilities from possible aerial bombardment. Consequently, many factories and most military installations are built underground. There is nothing secret about this.

### **Big Bangs at Yongbyon**

While living at the nuclear research center at Yongbyon, North Pyongan Province in 1995 and 1996, I often heard explosions coming from nearby Yaksan, the mountain made famous by a folk song about the mountain's beautiful azaleas in the spring. The explosions were very loud. Every time I heard one, I jumped in fear. I asked the North Korean workers about the explosions, but, of course, they never heard them. Clearly, the explosions came from inside the mountain. Just across the Kuryong River, only a few hundred meters from where the U.S. Nuclear Spent Fuel Team worked, we could see North Korean laborers and soldiers walking to and from the area. We could also see the growing piles of rock taken from inside the mountain.

Was this the beginning of a new, secret nuclear facility? I think not. Obviously it was not secret since we could hear and see the work, and knew the location. At the time, many new anti-aircraft sites were being built on top of hills around Yongbyon, and many new apartment buildings were being constructed for the families of the increasing number of military personnel moving into the area. North Koreans told me

all of this construction was designed to better protect the nuclear facility from possible attack by American Tomahawk missiles and F-15 fighters. I concluded that bomb proof shelters were being blasted inside the mountain to make bunkers for anti-aircraft guns and missiles, and to protect ammunition and soldiers.

### **North Korea's Smoking Mountains**

During the summers of 1996 and 1997, I traveled on most of the roads in the southern half of North Pyongan Province, and I flew over the entire area in North Korean helicopters. For six weeks in July and August 1997, an American army officer and I traveled every other day on different roads in a jeep to and from the area around Unsnap.

At Unsan there is also a big tunneling project. The town is about twenty five miles northeast of Yongbyon. The tunneling was being done to look for gold. Unsan has been the center of gold mining in the area since an American company opened the first mine there about one century ago.

A few miles south of Unsan, a new, two lane, concrete paved highway is being constructed. The road begins near the town of Kujang to the south, a coal mining town on the Chongjong River, and runs north toward the Chinese border. We first saw the road in June 1996 and asked if we could use it instead of the bumpy dirt road we always traveled. But our North Korean guides always told us the road was incomplete, and that a tunnel still had to be built to connect the new highway to the four lane highway that connects Pyongyang to the mountain resort at Myohyang-san.

Late last July, an American Army officer and I rented a Korean People's Army helicopter -- \$1,000 in cash U.S. dollars per hour. We needed to check the procedures for emergency medical evacuation by helicopter in case one of the US or North Korean soldiers searching for US Korean War remains were injured. We flew from Pyongyang north to an air base just south of the Chongchon River near Yongbyon, then east along the Chongchon River and north again to an area southwest of Unsan. Our flight took us very close to the area where the satellite photographs reportedly spotted a large construction site.

Nothing seemed unusual. The North Korean government did not seem concerned that we might spot some secret construction site; otherwise they would not have let us fly. Coal mines and a few factory towns dotted the landscape. Sometimes smoke came out of a mountain sides, and roads seemed to suddenly disappear into a

hillside. Probably these were places where factories had been built inside mountains. In North Korea, this is normal.

### **Fragrant Mountains**

Many days I have relaxed at the mountain resort of Myohyang-san, the Fragrant Mountains, appropriately named for the pleasing scent of pine that greets the visitor. This was Kim Il Sung's favorite place, and he died there in July 1994. His son Kim Jong Il now frequently visits the resort. Normal visitors stay either at the gray triangular tourist hotel or a government guest house further up the road. From the hotel, if one walks up the road for about a mile, a large construction site is visible. Here workers have been tunneling into the mountain since the fall of 1994. Huge piles of crushed granite dot the mountain side. The project's main entrance is covered with wooden scaffold. Thousands of workers each morning slowly stroll up the road toward the site.

There is nothing secret about the place. When complete, an enormous new exhibition hall will have been built inside the mountain to house gifts visiting dignitaries have presented to North Korea's new leader Kim Jong Il. The new hall will be modeled after the one first built to house his father's gifts.

### **Spy Satellites Can't Think**

Americans have an old saying - pictures never lie. But spy satellites and their pictures cannot think. Without human interpretation, pictures are not "intelligence". Actually, a picture can give us a false sense of confidence about how much we really know. Human analysis, on the other hand, is not infallible; it is only an interpretation, an educated guess about what is reality.

For example, a satellite may take a picture of a long white cylinder in a parking lot at a factory in Changwon, South Kyongsang Province. What is the white cylinder? Is it a water or propane gas tank, or a missile component? We do not know until intelligence analysts jointly interpret the picture using information from many other sources. Even then we probably will not get a 100% consensus about what the picture reveals. All we have is an "educated guess" until we either examine the object ourselves or ask someone we trust what it is. We do not trust North Koreans so asking about what they are building will not end our suspicions, even if they tell us the truth. The best solution is to visit the place ourselves.

## "Optimists" verse "Pessimists"

For a decade, the American intelligence community has been arguing about North Korea. Analysts in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), National Security Agency and State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) still do not agree about how many nuclear weapons North Korea may have. In 1995, they began debating whether North Korea really needed food aid. A year later, these same analysts publicly exchanged verbal blows over whether North Korea was on the verge of collapse. Now the debate seems to be focused on whether North Korea is secretly trying to restart its nuclear program. Some one in this group apparently decided to win the argument, and to scare the American and Korean public into changing policy toward North Korea by leaking secret "imagery intelligence" to the American press.

Behind all this squabbling there are two very different views of North Korea. One view is held by a group of analysts we will call optimists because they believe North Korea is capable of transforming itself into a responsible member of the international community. The other group consists of pessimistic who do not believe this can happen.

The optimists argue that the foremost goal of North Korea's leaders is national survival, not the forceful domination of South Korea. Pyongyang, the optimists believe, is trying to gradually end its isolation and to engage the outside world. As evidence, they point to North Korea's increasing trade with non-socialists nations, its opening of the country to foreigners, signing of the Basic Agreements with South Korea in 1992 and the Agreed Framework with the United States in 1994. They also cite North Korea's continuing cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Korea Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), the World Food Program (WFP) and numerous private, non-governmental organizations.

The optimists are convinced that Pyongyang is trying to use its potential to build weapons of mass destruction, that is its nuclear and missile programs, as bargaining chips to achieve maximum gains for minimal concessions in negotiations with the United States. All the while, the optimists admit that North Korea remains a dangerous, military power capable of abruptly starting war and destabilizing Northeast Asia.

The pessimists, on the other hand, are equally convinced that North Korea's primary goal remains the domination of the entire Korean peninsula. They view North

Korea's current cooperation with the international community as a temporary expedient designed to lure the international community into helping Pyongyang to modernize its economy. North Korea may be economically weak now and on the verge of famine, but, pessimists in the American intelligence community believe, once it has restored its economic vigor, Pyongyang could unveil secretly hidden weapons of mass destruction and return to a coercive and hostile foreign policy toward both Seoul and Washington.

### **Needed - An On the Spot Visit**

Our purpose here is not to pick sides. Both views have their merits. On the other hand, the recent leak of unsubstantiated "intelligence" certainly appears to have been an irresponsible effort by a "pessimist" within the American intelligence community. Their deed accomplished nothing constructive. The argument in the American intelligence community will continue. After all, that is what intelligence analysts are paid to do. On the other hand, unfortunately, the Korean people on both sides of the demilitarized zone have been frightened and confused, intensifying the half century of distrust and fear that divides them.

Whether North Korea is building a "secret" new nuclear facility remains a mystery. Obviously, we are not likely to find out what is really going on in North Korea by reading American newspapers. When it comes to North Korea, American journalists seem more interested in getting a sensational "scope" than in collecting the knowledge necessary to assess the reliability of their sources. At the same time, the international press seems too willing to merely repeat what appears in a prominent American newspaper. As for the American intelligence community, those who know North Korea the best are unlikely to talk to the press and those analysts who talk to the press are acting irresponsibly and should not be trusted.

What is an intelligent person to do? First, we can follow the example set by our governments. Neither the US or ROK governments appear overly concerned. North Korea could certainly help the situation. If it has nothing to hide, and is sincere about fulfilling its pledge not to pursue further a nuclear weapons program, Pyongyang's leaders should allow outsiders to visit the suspected site. Such a visit would be a concrete step toward calming the situation on the Korean peninsula, as well as the debate in the American intelligence community.