

VOA Note #12

DATE: June 7, 1993
PLACE: 42nd Street bagel shop, New York City
EVENT: The Bagel Shop Talks
PARTICIPANTS: Li Yong-ho, deputy director, International Affairs
Division, DPRK Foreign Ministry
Ambassador Ho Jong, DPRK Deputy Permanent
Representative to the UN
C. Kenneth Quinones, North Korea Affairs Officer
Office of Korea Affairs, State Department

The first week of US-DPRK nuclear talks had not gone well. Required by their home governments to read from prepared “talking points,” both sides had talked past each other. There had not been any actual negotiations. The dialogue was relatively simple: the US wanted North Korea to stay in the NPT and North Korea said it would pull out on June 11 because of the US “hostile policy” toward it and the IAEA’s “partial attitude toward the DPRK.”

Early Monday June 7, just after I had briefed EAP/K office director about the New York talks, Ambassador Ho Jong called me to ask that I return as soon as possible to New York alone for informal discussions. My supervisor Charles Kartman immediately directed that I fly to New York. Without any luggage, not even a tooth brush, I headed for Washington National Airport. By noon I was in Manhattan and asked Ambassador Ho to meet me at a small bagel shop on 42nd Street across from the New York Helmsley Hotel (shop is gone). I figured that journalists would be watching the US Mission to the UN and the Park Ave. Helmsley Hotel for any sign of activity by the US and DPRK delegations so I picked a humble out of the way place for the meeting. No journalists ever discovered our meeting place.

My orders were simple – find out what the North Koreans wanted and report back to Washington. Over orange juice, Ho introduced me to Li Yong-ho, a very impressive fellow. Talk and soft spoken he spoke fluent English which he had learned at Pyongyang University for Foreign Languages and while studying abroad in Europe. Li explained that his responsibilities focused on North Korea’s obligations under its membership in the NPT and safeguards agreement with the IAEA.

Li stunned me when he told me that while attending a UN Disarmament seminar in Geneva, his room mate had been a South Korean diplomat. The seminar included a visit to the Pentagon in Washington, DC. Li explained that he had been admitted to the Pentagon as a “Korean” participant in the seminar and had been allowed to listen to a classified briefing about the United States strategy of nuclear deterrence.

I got to know Li very well during the next few years. When we visited the North Korea side of Panmunjom in October 1993, he told me that his father had been a North Korean journalist during the 1953 Korea War Armistice talks. Li added that he polished his English by reading major US and British news magazines which he was allowed to receive and keep at his home. Eventually Li was appointed the first DPRK ambassador to the United Kingdom.

At the “bagel shop,” Li expressed concern that his home government was ready to order the DPRK delegation to return to Pyongyang without further talks. Kang Sok-ju, however, according to Li, had asked for more time to seek clarification from the US side and ordered Li to meet with me in “working level” talks. The North Koreans’ foremost concern was the presence of a representative of the US military’s Joint Chief of Staff on the US delegation. Li asked whether this meant that if the negotiations failed, would the US resort to the use of military force to end North Korea’s nuclear program. Li knew that some US military generals had called for a “surgical” air attack on Yongbyon similar to the one that Israel had conducted against Iraq’s nuclear facility. Li emphasized that if the US strategy was “carrots and stick,” did the “stick” mean military force.

I quickly found myself explaining how foreign policy is made in the US government and asked for time to report back to Washington. I called Charles Kartman to report what I had learned. He told me to get a hotel room and prepare to stay in New York. Meanwhile he would seek directions from his superiors about how to proceed. An hour later he directed me to give the North Korea’s a detailed but unclassified explanation about US foreign policy and how it was made. I went to the US Mission to the UN and photocopied the State and Defense Department organization charts in their telephone directories and headed back to the bagel shop. After several hours of explanation we broke for supper and agreed to resume our talks the next morning.

Meanwhile the South Korean embassy (Ambassador Han Sung-su, now ROK Prime Minister) and ROK Ambassador to the UN Yu Myung-hwan (now ROK Foreign Minister) were very anxious because I had disappeared and no one would tell them where I could be found or what I was doing.

June 8 the “Bagel Shop talks” resumed. The shop keeper had no idea who we were or what we were doing but so long as we kept ordering orange juice and ice tea he was happy. Each side took turns pay the bill. The three of us sat in the front window to avoid making anyone suspicious.

Li Yong-ho surprised me with a new proposal. Would the US agree to issue a joint statement with the DPRK about the nuclear issue? If Washington agreed, then the talks would resume. Otherwise the DPRK delegation would return home. Wow – this exploded in my mind like a bomb. Never had the US government ever considered doing anything jointly with the North Korean government which it considered an enemy and supporter of international terrorism. How would the South Korean government react? Would the Pentagon ever approve such a move?

Again I reported back to Charles Kartman. Like me, he was stunned but said he would do his best to rally support for the idea. Meanwhile I was to find out what the North Koreans wanted in the statement.

Day three of the “bagel talks” proved extremely stressful. The June 11 deadline for North Korea’s withdrawal from the NPT was only three days away and I was all alone in New York sipping ice tea with North Koreans trying to convince them to return to the negotiations.

Citing orders from his superior Kang Sok-ju, Li Yong-ho explained that the most important thing was the statement be issued jointly and that the US promise not to threaten to use military force against North Korea. As for the US, I had been authorized to press for North Korea's promise to remain a member of the NPT, to return to the negotiations and to fulfill its promises to the IAEA. Late that day I had a tentative agreed with Li who said it would have to be approved by Pyongyang.

When I reported the progress to Kartman, he said to expect the US delegation to return to New York the afternoon of June 9 and that if Pyongyang approved the tentative content of the joint statement, the talks would resume on Friday June 10, one day before the deadline.

The next morning I met two colleagues from Washington at the US Mission to the UN. We were to draft a tentative joint statement, get approval from the National Security Council, and then I was to get Li Yong-ho to approve the basic content in talks scheduled to resume that afternoon. From my small copy of the UN Charter I included in the draft the promise that the United States would not use military force against North Korea. When we read the draft over the telephone to the National Security Adviser for Proliferation Affairs, he yelled, "Where the hell did you get that language?" I calmly responded, "It's from the UN Charter." An hour later he called and authorized me to discuss the draft with the North Koreans.

A very long afternoon of tense discussions continued into the late evening. Meanwhile the US delegation was waiting to hear from me – had the North Koreans accepted the basic elements of our draft joint statement? I told Li he had to meet me half way. I explained that I had risked my career as a diplomat by advocating the first US-DPRK joint statement and had pushed the National Security Council to promise not to use force against North Korea. Therefore he owed me. North Korea had to include in the joint statement a promise to remain a member of the NPT and to resume its cooperation with the IAEA. Li met me half way – he could commit his government to remain in the NPT so long as the negotiations continued but cooperation with the IAEA would have to wait.

When I got back to the US Mission to the UN, Charles Kartman was waiting for me at the back door (there were too many journalists watching the front). He greeted me, "Well is its about time. What the hell happened?" When I told him what I had, he expressed greet relief and we both promptly brief Robert Gallucci.

The US-DPRK nuclear negotiations resumed on Friday June 10, one day prior to the deadline for North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT.

C. Kenneth Quinones
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