

VOA Note #18

DATE: July 1993
EVENT: US to Israel - No Missile Talks
PLACE: Department of State, Washington, DC
PRESENT: Acting Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, Israeli Government official and North Korea Affairs Officer
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Back in Washington after the inconclusive second round of US-DPRK nuclear talks, I was dispatched by the Bureau of East Asia and Pacific Affairs to be the note taker in a meeting between then acting Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger and a high ranking Israeli negotiator. I was chosen as the note taker because of my responsibilities as the North Korea Affairs officer and involvement in the nuclear talks.

The meeting proved to be highly sensitive. The State Department had asked the Israeli official to meet with the acting Secretary of State to brief him on the status of very secret negotiations between the governments of Israel and North Korea. The talks had commenced some months earlier, and had been arranged by an intermediary – an Israeli businessman who had contacts with people in North Korea.

For several years North Korea had been building short range, Soviet technology based Scud (250-500 kilometer) and intermediate range (1300 to 1500 hundred kilometer) Nodong ballistic missiles. Some of the missiles were made operational in North Korea. The Scuds were designed to destroy US military bases in South Korea while the Nodong missiles were targeted at US military bases in Japan. Pyongyang's military also exported these highly profitable missiles to selected Middle East nations which included Syria, Iraq, Iran and Egypt. Payment to North Korea was in crude oil and hard currency.

The Bush Administration of 1989-93 had made it a priority to halt North Korea's missile exports. They were viewed as being potentially very destabilizing in the Middle East and posed a serious threat to Israel's security. This had become apparent during the first Gulf War of 1990-01 when Iraq launched several North Korean made ballistic missiles into Israel.

Washington's concerns were presented at the first ever meeting between North Korean officials and US diplomats which convened for a single day in January 1992 in New York. The talks were not a negotiation but rather an exchange of views. At the talks, the US government listed its preconditions for the normalization of diplomatic relations with North Korea. The list included ending North Korea's nuclear program, halting its export of ballistic missiles, continuing South-North Korea dialogue, cooperation with the recovery of all US Korean War dead remains (some 8,000 men) from North Korea and enhanced respect for human rights.

When North Korea's declaration that it would withdraw from the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) triggered the first nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula in March 1993, Washington made halting North Korea's nuclear program its first priority. Ending North Korea's missile exports was deemed its second priority because at the time North Korea was able to produce plutonium to

make nuclear bombs, but it lacked the ability to deliver these weapons either by airplane or ballistic missile.

Israel, however, was not satisfied with this prioritization. It had already been attacked by North Korean produced and conventionally armed ballistic missiles launched by its neighbors. Israel was intent upon ending the ballistic missile threat as soon as possible. Toward this end, it began secret negotiations with Pyongyang to end its missile exports.

By June 1993, Israel and North Korea were very close to a deal. In exchange for ending its export of ballistic missiles (Scud and Nodong), Israel expressed the willingness to: pay North Korea one billion US dollars cash, normalize diplomatic relations and dispatch Israel's prime minister on an official visit to Pyongyang. Also being considered was Israeli private investment in upgrading the production facilities at North Korea's gold and coal mines.

South Korea shared US concerns about such a deal. From Seoul's point of view, the normalization of Israeli-North Korea relations would erode its claim of being the single legitimate government on the Korean Peninsula. Also, the deal would invigorate North Korea's economy just at a time that it was on the verge of collapse.

Washington saw the Israeli-North Korea talks as potentially complicating its nuclear negotiations with North Korea. It was believed that Pyongyang would make similar demands on the US, i.e. a huge cash payment, normalization of relations, private investment in North Korea and the exchange of high level official visits, something Washington at the time was not prepared to allow.

The US acting Secretary of State assertively urged the Israeli government to disengage from further talks with North Korea. Israel subsequently did so. Consequently the issue of ending North Korea's missile exports became the sole prerogative of the United States government which placed the issue on the diplomatic back burner. Eventually, after the Agreed Framework had been signed and its implementation initiated in October 1994, the US and North Korea met in April 1995 to discuss phasing out ballistic missile exports. The talks proved inconclusive until 1999 when North Korea agreed to a moratorium on testing its ballistic missiles, which it discontinued in June 2006. North Korea nevertheless continues to export ballistic missiles. Their quality and range, however, have not improved during the past decade as evident from the two failed tests of the three stage, long range Taepodong missile.

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