

VOA Note #20

DATE: September-December 1993
EVENT: The “New York Channel Talks”
PLACE: Department of State, Washington, DC
PRESENT: DPRK Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN
Ho Jong and his assistant Han Song-ryol, and US representatives
Gary Samore, assistant to Assistant Secretary Gallucci
and North Korea Affairs Officer C. Kenneth Quinones

The US-North Korea nuclear talks were essentially suspended from mid-July 1993 until early July 1994 pending the resumption of South-North Korea dialogue and an IAEA-DPRK agreement that would permit regular IAEA visits to Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center. North Korea’s announcement on September 1, 1993 that it was willing to reopen dialogue with South Korea paved the way for “working level” talks between Washington and Pyongyang. From September 1993 until July 1994, when the full negotiations resumed, these “working level” talks occurred 33 times in New York. They became known as the “New York Channel Talks” because they involved Ambassador Ho Jong and I as the North Korea Affairs officer, the primary contacts in the “New York Channel” plus Gary Samore, an expert on matters related to the IAEA and nuclear proliferation issues, and Ho Jong’s assistant Political Minister Han Song-ryol whom he was grooming as his replacement.

The talks’ goal was to resolve technical issues prior to the resumption of full scale negotiations. From September 1993 until the end of February 1994, our primary purpose was to establish precise and comprehensive definitions of terminology and the type of inspections Washington insisted Pyongyang must allow the IAEA to conduct at Yongbyon to confirm that “full scope nuclear safeguards” were being maintained. In January and February 1994 the talks focused on how to restart South-North Korea dialogue and produced the so-called “Agreed Conclusions.” The final “New York Channel Talks” of May to July 1994 addressed US concerns about North Korea’s removal of nuclear fuel from its 5 megawatt reactor at Yongbyon and the time and place for resumption of the full scale talks which occurred in July 1994.

Prior to each session of the “New York Channel Talks,” Assistant Secretary Gallucci would consult with the National Security Council adviser on Nuclear Proliferation issues, Dan Poneman, the Deputy Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) Norman Wulf, State Department Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Thomas Hubbard, and representatives of the Department of Defense and Energy, which is responsible for nuclear reactor and weapons related matters. If the US wanted to convene a meeting, I was directed to call Ambassador Ho to make the arrangements. Similarly, he would call me when his government wished to have a meeting.

Once the day and time was sent for the meeting, Gary and I would meet at Washington National Airport (now Reagan National) and fly together on one of the two shuttle airlines to New York. Usually we reached the US Mission to the UN by 10:30 or 11:00 AM. There we would receive our instructions and talking points that had been prepared at the State Department and approved by the National Security Council at the White House.

About 30 minutes before the scheduled meeting, which was always held at the United Nations Headquarters building, Gary and I, accompanied by a member of the US UN Mission staff would depart from the mission building using different exits and walking in three different directions. Our aim was to confuse any journalists who might be watching. Unwittingly we aroused the suspicion of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) that thought our activities strange, especially since they knew I had frequent contact with North Korean officials. Nevertheless, our efforts to avoid the press were totally successful and they never discovered our meeting place.

We also established the custom of taking turns buying coffee for each other at these meetings. Initially I would have to prepare an "action memorandum" addressed to the Secretary of State in which I asked permission to meet with and to purchase coffee for North Korean diplomats. Eventually the meetings came to be accepted as routine and the time consuming process was eliminated.

After each meeting, however, we were required to submit a full written report to Washington, DC. Originally I would write these reports, but my preference for detail concerned some in Washington. Critics of the US-DPRK talks would use my detailed reports to argue against their continuation. In part this was a consequence of the Seoul government's desire to see these talks halted.

In the fall of 1993, South Korean President Kim Yong-sam was very displeased that the United States continued to hold talks with North Korea, even though such talks were at the "working level." Seoul's concerns were prompted by the US refusal to consult first with it about the agenda and talking points for the New York channel talks. Consequently the South Korean embassy assigned a very capable diplomat to watch me like a hawk. I was under orders to brief him, but only after each session of talks had concluded. This proved of considerable benefit to the US government because one of North Korea's ploys is to cause tension between the United States and its allies South Korea and Japan by fostering distrust between the allies. To minimize Pyongyang's success in this regard, I was under orders to share with the South Korean government what ever I told the North Korean government. This prevented Pyongyang nurturing distrust. Similarly I kept the Japanese fully informed.

As the "New York Channel Talks" became known to the wider diplomatic community in Washington, I found myself briefing more and more foreign embassies. Eventually I was meeting weekly with diplomats from Russia, China, the European Union (EU), the UK, Canada, France, Germany, Israel, Hungary, Finland, Italy, Egypt (whose leader was North Korean leader Kim Il Sung's personal friend), Australia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and of course South Korea and Japan.

The New York Channel Talks proved highly beneficial to both sides. These one to three hour long sessions enabled both sides to exchange views candidly on numerous matters. In the process we learned much about areas of shared concern and deep difference. Had these talks not occurred, chances of eventual success in the primary talks would have been marginal at best.

C. Kenneth Quinones
December 7, 2008