

VOA Note #7

DATE: Early May 1993

PLACE: Department of State

Event: Ambassador Ho Jong Calls the State Department

For six weeks following North Korea's March 11, 1993 announcement that it would withdraw from the NPT, US policy makers remains entangled in debating which policy options to pursue toward North Korea: war or negotiations. Seoul remained adamantly opposed to both options. Japan was equally non-committal. Nevertheless, the Office of Korea Affairs (EAP/K) initiated trilateral meetings between the US, ROK and Japan to discuss options for dealing with North Korea.

The situation was made even more tense in April because of the annual US-ROK joint military exercise Team Spirit which North Korea despised but was conducted on a grand scale with over 500,000 military personnel involved.

Meanwhile, the US government relied on the so-called "Beijing channel" in the hope of communicating with Pyongyang and learning more about its intentions. This cumbersome channel had been opened in 1988 as part of the US government's "modest initiative" to defuse North Korea's frustration over being excluded from the 1988 Seoul Olympiad. To send a message to Pyongyang, EAP/K would draft the message (I did the drafting) and gain approval from numerous concerned offices in Washington, including the White House. This usually took one full working day. Once approved, the National Security Council will call me at home around 1 A.M. for final approval of the text and authorization to send the message to the US embassy in Beijing. Once received in Beijing, a secretary in the embassy political section would call the DPRK embassy a couple of blocks away to arrange a day, time and meeting place for the messages delivering. At the agreed time, the US political minister would meet his DPRK counterpart in a coffee shop and deliver the message in an envelope. No conversation was allowed except for the DPRK official to ask for clarification about the message's content. After five minutes, the meeting ended.

The DPRK embassy in Beijing sent the message to Pyongyang. After review their, any response was sent to the DPRK embassy in Beijing and another meeting was arranged. This "Beijing channel" process took several days to complete. Obviously it proved useless in a crisis situation. The ROK government, however, opposed any alteration, insisting instead that Pyongyang should communicate directly to Seoul through Panmunjom.

Meanwhile, EAP/K worked with the US mission to the UN to rally international criticism of the DPRK. This effort proved extremely successful. Japan and Russia proved very helpful. China preferred to play a publicly neutral role. But by the end of April, the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly voted to condemn North Korea's conduct and to urge it to remain in the NPT. Only five or six nations voted in support of the DPRK such as Cuba, Syria, etc. China abstained, which was a shock to the DPRK.

Soon after this vote, DPRK Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Ho Jong called me at the Department of State, the first time that any DPRK government official called the State Department. The call came at noon. I was calmly eating a

salad in my office when the office secretary entered and exclaimed – “Boy, you are in big trouble.” Some guy on the telephone wants to talk to you and claims he is the North Korean Ambassador to the UN.” I paused. At the time no US government official was authorized to talk to any North Korea for any reason unless written permission had been obtained first. More concerned about the dangerous situation and less about future career prospects, I said I would take the call.

Ho Jong greeted me cheerfully, obviously relieved that I had accepted his call. He explained that his government had authorized for him to meet with appropriate State Department officials to discuss the possibility of negotiations regarding North Korea’s withdrawal from the NPT. Wow! Great news. As always, the US government is incapable of making a decision unless there is a crisis that demands an immediate response. Ho Jong’s request created a crisis – he needed an answer sooner rather than later. I told him that I would consult with my superior, Office Director Charles Kartman and call him as soon as possible.

Kartman immediately reprimanded me for ignoring State Department rules, but did so with a broad grin. This was the crisis he needed to push for negotiations, a policy option he and I had favored from the beginning. Within an hour he had won permission for me to call Ho Jong back to arrange the meeting, but without any commitment regarding negotiations. Ho Jong and I quickly agreed to meet at 11 AM the next day in the basement of the United Nations Headquarters in New York.

After being informed, South Korean embassy officials were initially stunned by how quickly the US had decided to arrange the meeting and then focused on trying to micro-manage what the US would do in the meeting. We listened politely but only promised to fully inform the ROK government about what transpired at the meeting. Less than thirty days remained before North Korea’s threatened withdrawal from the NPT.

I am convinced had we waited much longer, the US would have opted for military action against North Korea. Fortunately Ho Jong’s call had forced the US government to decide to take the initiative in dealing with Pyongyang. There after, Seoul found itself following Washington’s lead, something it had not done since the signing of the Korea War Armistice in 1953.

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