

**VOA Note #14**

**DATE: Late June 1993**

**Place: Washington, DC and Geneva**

**Event: Opening the New York Channel**

**Participants: DPRK Ambassador Ho Jong and  
State Department North Korea Affairs Officer  
C. Kenneth Quinones**

The opening of the “New York Channel” was a major turning point in US-DPRK relations. At the end of the “New York” round of nuclear talks on June 11, 1993, the North Koreans asked how they could communicate with the State Department about arrangements for the next round of talks. Chief US negotiator Robert Gallucci designed State Department North Korea Affairs Officer C. Kenneth Quinones as the point of contact on all US-North Korea related matters.

Until that time there had been only two ways to communicate between the two governments. The usual channel was at Panmunjom in the middle of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). There representatives of the Military Armistice Commission or MAC met to discuss the armistice’s implementation and related problems. Military officers from the United Nations (i.e. the United States), North Korea and People’s Republic of China (PRC) had met often, usually to shout at one another. South Korea was not represented because it had not signed the Armistice which halted fighting in July 1953 but without establishing a formal peace treaty. As a channel of communication, the “MAC meetings” tended to perpetuate rather than resolve problems.

In 1988 the United States, with South Korea’s encouragement, launched the “Modest Initiative.” This effort was designed to temper Pyongyang’s frustrations when Seoul rejected its request to be included in the Seoul Olympiad. Pyongyang first reacted by blowing up a South Korean Airliner in 1987, killing all on board and convincing Washington to place North Korea on the U.S. list of nations that sponsored and supported international terrorism. Concerned that North Korea might retaliate by committing acts of terrorism before and during the 1988 Olympic games in Seoul, the Reagan Administration extended an olive branch to Pyongyang, the so-called Modest Initiative. Seoul eagerly supported the initiative.

For the first time the United States government announced in 1988, just before the Seoul Olympiad began, that it would ease Trading with the Enemy Act (TWEA) sanctions that had been imposed on North Korea immediately after the Korean War commenced on June 25, 1950. Henceforth, Americans could export to North Korea “basic human needs” such as food, medicine, and educational supplies. But first the US exported had to obtain a license. North Koreans would be allowed to visit the United States as part of educational exchanges. Also, government-to-government communication would become possible through the so-called “Beijing Channel.”

The channel got its name because the point of contact was the two nations’ embassies in Beijing. But the communications were clumsy and slow. First one side would arrange to meet a representative of the other side at a “neutral” place in Beijing. There a letter would be passed from one side to the other. Discussion was limited to clarifying the letter’s content. Two or three days later, after the receiving capital had

had the opportunity to prepare a response, another meeting was set and the response conveyed in another letter.

The “New York channel” was initiated to quicken the response time between the two sides to facilitate arranging for the timing and place of the next round of negotiations. Mutual need between the US and North Korea quickly expanded the scope of the issues discussed in the New York channel. All my contact with the North Korean Mission to the UN in New York was authorized by the Secretary of State. Prior to each contact, I would prepare a memorandum to the Secretary of State explaining the purpose of the contact with the North Koreans. These memoranda were coordinated with the Assistant Secretaries of State for Political-Military Affairs and East Asian and Pacific Affairs, and the Under-secretary for Political Affairs, as well as the National Security Council and Department of Defense.

Once authorized, I would make a telephone call to Ambassador Ho Jong. If necessary he would call me either at my office or home. One evening I arrived home at the usual time of 9 PM. My wife greeted me with a confused expression on her face. She said that the “Korean ambassador” had called, but the person’s name, Ho Jong, did not match that of then ROK Ambassador Han Seung-soo, now ROK Prime Minister. When I told my wife the person who called was the “North Korean” ambassador, she expressed concern that she since she had been born in South Korea she would now be in trouble with both the US and South Korean governments. I assured her that I was authorized to receive such calls and asked her to assist in the future by politely receiving calls from Ambassador Ho, which she did every time.

By the end of June 1993 it had been decided that the next round of negotiations would be in Geneva. The site had several benefits. Internationally it was viewed as politically neutral being in Switzerland. For the US side, it was an easy and not very long or expensive flight from Washington. Also the US Mission in Geneva was large and had often hosted US-USSR disarmament talks so it had all the necessary facilities. Pyongyang was also comfortable with the site because its delegation could easily fly via its national airline, Air Koryo, to Berlin and then finally to Geneva. North Korea’s diplomatic mission in Geneva, like that of the US, was large and enclosed within walls which minimized concerns about security. Equally important was the need to control the international press which had become a major problem in New York City.

No sooner had arrangements been agreed than North Korea threatened to pull out of the talks. The excuse was President Clinton’s cautioning of North Korea not to take any military action toward South Korea at the same time that the US aircraft carrier USS Midway was conducting a training exercise in the Yellow Sea. Some in Pyongyang interpreted both moves as breaking the US pledge made in the June 11 joint statement not to threaten the use of military force against the DPRK.

This mini-crisis erupted the night before my scheduled departure for Geneva to finalize arrangements for the second round of US-DPRK talks. Ambassador Ho Jong, on instructions from Pyongyang had called me at home to express Pyongyang’s concerns and the threat to pull out of the talks unless President Clinton apologized for his remarks. I drove to the State Department, a 45 minute drive, and went to the Operations Center to read the latest reports about President Clinton’s remarks and US

military activities in Northeast Asia. Ho Jong's claims were accurate but his interpretation distorted. It was Saturday night and there was no time for memoranda to the Secretary of State so I made my own decisions. I called Ho Jong and told him it would be best to meet in Geneva to discuss the matter. I assured him that the US had no hostile intent toward the DPRK and that the deployment of the aircraft carrier was routine and unconnected to the forthcoming talks. As for President Clinton's remarks, these too reflected standard US policy and had nothing to do with the negotiations. Ho Jong accepted my explanation and we agreed to meet three days later in Geneva, but he cautioned that some in Pyongyang were still intent upon interrupting the talks.

After a sleepless night, my wife dropped me off at Dulles International Airport for the flight to Geneva. Other members of the US delegation would follow me in a couple of days.

C. Kenneth Quinones  
November 16, 2008