



North Korea Climbdown

(Published in *The Wall Street Journal*, March 5, 2007)

John R. Bolton

Colaboraciones n° 1547

March 9, 2007

Washington's most important person--the Anonymous Senior Official ("ASO")--was busy last week, briefing reporters on North Korea's uranium enrichment program.

The North's pursuit of nuclear weapons through uranium enrichment, an alternative to reprocessing plutonium from spent fuel at the Yongbyon reactor, constituted both a material breach of the 1994 Agreed Framework and an enormous challenge to the hope that it could ever be negotiated out of pursuing nuclear weapons. Based, however, on one public comment and much work by Mr./Ms. ASO, the media last week set about deconstructing a critical strategic concern underlying Bush administration Korea policy. According to their breathless reporting, yet another threat to America was disappearing, revealed as sim-

ply more intelligence hype from an administration that apparently did little else in its first term.

The reports raise three separate issues. First, what exactly is the intelligence judgment about North Korea's enrichment activities, and how valid was it in 2002? Second, what are the implications for the administration's ongoing negotiations with North Korea? And third, is Mr./Ms. ASO speaking for the Bush administration, or for those elements in the permanent bureaucracy that have consistently opposed key elements of the Bush foreign policy, at least as conducted until recently?

On the first question, concerning North Korea's enrichment activities, there is actually less here than meets the eye. The only attributable public comment is from Joseph DeTrani,

mission manager for North Korea for the Director of National Intelligence, who said that he now had a "mid-confidence level" about North Korea's program, down from "high confidence." Mr. DeTrani's testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee recounted how, in October 2002, the U.S. confronted Pyongyang "with information they were acquiring material sufficient for a production-scale capability of enriching uranium," and how North Korea "admitted to having such a program." Mr. DeTrani continued, "we've never walked away from that issue." Indeed, in 2002, intelligence community officials told me that new evidence erased existing, long-standing disagreements within the community about what the North was up to since the mid-1990s, producing a remarkable consensus that has not, to my knowledge, broken down since.

Neither in Mr. DeTrani's testimony, nor in any of Mr./Ms. ASO's backgrounding, is there any reversal on actual facts, only an apparent shift in the "confidence level." My understanding is that the decrease in confidence stems from the absence of significant new or contemporary information about North Korea's activities. This lack of new information may be attributable to a loss of sensitive sources and methods, or it may be attributable to the effectiveness of President Bush's Proliferation Security Initiative, or its creative financial sanctions, in drying up North Korea's procurement activity. But there has been no suggestion that the intelligence from 2002 and earlier has been contradicted or dis-

credited. Mr. DeTrani's testimony is expressly to the contrary. Indeed, on Saturday he reiterated this precise point in a second public statement.

Moreover, as Donald Rumsfeld likes to say, "the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." If we lack new intelligence, analysts should say so explicitly, and policy makers can draw appropriate conclusions, one of which might well be that the North is simply better at concealing its clandestine nuclear activities, not that those activities don't exist. What analysts should not do is to cast doubt on earlier intelligence, or change confidence levels, if there are no other reasons to do so. In any event, there is nothing here to allow anyone to conclude that the 2002 intelligence conclusions were flawed or hyped.

This raises the second issue. Mr./Ms. ASO's backgrounding is really about the ongoing six-party talks, and less about what happened in 2002. In any arms-control negotiation, the need for verification is directly correlated to the propensity of the other side to lie, cheat and conceal its undesirable activities. In the present case, the greater the likelihood that North Korea will make commitments it has absolutely no intention of following, the more intrusive and pervasive should be the verification mechanism we insist on. Determining in this or any other case how invasive the verification process must be obviously depends in large part on the historical record.

North Korea's aggressive mendacity puts it near the top of the list, per-

haps tied with Iran for the lead, of countries that need the most transparent, most intrusive, most pervasive verification systems. For America to agree to anything less would be to make our national security, and that of close friends and allies like Japan, dependent on North Korea's word--never a safe bet. And yet, it is precisely this extensive verification system that the North cannot accept, because the transparency we must require would threaten the very rock of domestic oppression on which the North Korean regime rests. North Korea's negotiators understand this contradiction. So do ours.

The only way around this problem is to conclude it doesn't exist, or is so minimal it can be "fixed" in negotiations. That's why Mr./Ms. ASO was busy, laying the foundation to argue that further deals with North Korea do not require much, if any, verification beyond what little the International Atomic Energy Agency can provide. If we continue this approach, what is already a bad deal will become a dangerous deal,

whether we make it with North Korea directly or in the six-party talks. (As [Nick Eberstadt](#) has put it, a bad agreement with six parties is no better than a bad agreement with two parties.)

And that brings us to the third issue: Where exactly is the administration headed? Mr./Ms. ASO's identity is by definition unknown, but the view is spreading that this back-grounding is more than the bureaucracy's ruminations. I have my own unnamed senior officials who tell me it's not so, but the question remains. President Bush himself must speak, and sooner rather than later, to tell us what he thinks of the intelligence, and the direction of his own policy. Recent polls show his approval rating near 30 percent, with support among Republicans falling precipitously. If the president's conservative base erodes further, where will his support come from? From liberal editorialists enthusing about his newfound foreign policy "pragmatism"? Based on my personal experience, the president will not have both.

Copyright 2007 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved