

Pyongyang Speaks: An Interview Inside North Korea

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I first visited the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea in 1992. The personality cult then built around "Great Leader" Kim Il-sung was suffocating. The emphasis on the military was significant. Pyongyang, though the country's showcase, was plain and poor, lagging behind most any major South Korean city in notable ways; I spied, for instance, an ox-cart in the DPRK capital, and many of them in the countryside.

Much has changed since then. In mid-June I visited North Korea at the invitation of the Institute for American Studies, which is part of the Foreign Ministry. Pyongyang today is much more prosperous than it was 25 years ago. There has been significant construction and reliance on more stylish architecture. The city hosts more activity normal for Westerners, from private cabs to cell phones. But the countryside is less well developed and the North's dark underside remains mass repression. Today it has captured global attention by testing nuclear weapons and missiles of various ranges. North Koreans reflexively cite the "wise leadership of the Supreme Leader" in whatever they do. But Pyongyang appears to risk a direct military confrontation with the Trump administration, which insists that it will not allow the DPRK to develop intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of targeting the U.S.

What can be done to avoid military confrontation and a potential Second Korean War? I spoke with Choe Kang il, Vice President of Institute for American Studies and Deputy Director General for North American Affairs at the Foreign Ministry, Pyongyang.

How do you see the situation facing the DPRK?

Today is a serious period. But our task reflects the slogan, 'let us advance to the great victory of socialism'. We are working day by day to fulfil the request of the Supreme Leader who, in his New Year's address, told us to put our main focus on national development and the five year plan. The goal is to stimulate real economic growth and keep balance between different sectors of the economy.

Our people are engaged in a process of self-development and have achieved vast progress in many different fields. Our people are not complacent with what they have achieved. They are buckling down to achieve even greater success in the future, not only in the economic field but in the national defense sector in response to ever-increasing nuclear blackmail from the U.S,

threatening the sovereignty of the DPRK government and the right to existence of the DPRK. Thus, our country has soared from nuclear power to rocket power.

We have confronted many obstacles. But under the wise leadership of the Supreme Leader and with the unity of spirit of the people our final victory is assured.

How have international events affected your plans?

I use the word self-development. The meaning of self-development is raising ourselves up with our own efforts. I must point to some basic points about our situation on the Korean Peninsula and the root cause of the escalation in tensions. The situation is touch and go with an imminent threat of all-out war. There are times of easing tensions sometimes but overall the trend is toward escalation. That ultimately is the root cause of the problem.

Now, to listen to the Western media and experts, they engage in fabrication as if the increased tensions are all due to the DPRK's development of nuclear weapons and its decision to build nukes. But the root cause of the escalated tensions is because of the U.S. hostile policy toward the DPRK. This hostile policy is extreme and includes all sectors, including military threats, nuclear blackmail, and economic sanctions. Long before the DPRK went nuclear the U.S. maintained this hostile policy. The U.S. has posed a nuclear threat to the DPRK for more than a half century. This is the reality. The U.S. has threatened the DPRK with the use of nuclear weapons.

What is your response to the argument that North Korea's nuclear development has resulted in a tougher American response?

From the last half of the 1950s the U.S. deployed a large arsenal of nuclear weapons in South Korea. From the end of the 1960s the U.S. used joint military exercises against the DPRK. These have stayed ever since. There is nuclear blackmail going on today and it is getting bigger. The DPRK has made efforts for dialog and negotiation to resolve this issue and to eliminate the nuclear threat from the U.S. We have put dozens of proposals on the table to ease tensions, such as a peace offer and to create a peaceful nuclear-free zone on the peninsula.

Despite our efforts, the U.S. nuclear threat did not go away. Instead, the DPRK was designated as a target of a preemptive nuclear strike. As our efforts to promote dialog all failed and we were confronted with the biggest hostile forces ever, we came to the conclusion that we need to confront force with force. Nukes with nukes.

Even after 2005 when the DPRK declared that it possessed nuclear weapons, we continued our effort to establish a peace mechanism on the Korean peninsula. We took part in the Six-Party Talks in 2003 and 2004 and took major steps in freezing our nuclear facilities. But the nuclear blackmail did not go. It went up.

Successive U.S. administrations contend that they negotiated with Pyongyang, only to see it continue with its nuclear developments. Why doesn't this justify America's military response?

The Bush administration scrapped the Agreed Framework. The Obama administration excluded the DPRK from the list of countries against which the U.S. would not use nuclear weapons. The U.S. went on with the joint military exercises with the puppet forces of South Korea. Moreover, these exercises grew both in scale and length of time and persisted throughout the year. As the

content and the character of the military exercises became more ambitious they openly staged special operations drills, which were targeted at the supreme headquarters of the DPRK.

The U.S. also committed strategic assets and other military hardware to the Korean peninsula and surrounding areas. The nuclear bombers flew over the Korean peninsula and nuclear submarines also were committed to the waters surrounding the Korean peninsula.

In other words, their nuclear blackmail became more open and undisguised. Exercises last year included decapitation operations directed at the supreme headquarters. And as with the political switch in the U.S. to the Trump administration around the New Year, the nuclear blackmail did not go away. In the recent exercises which went on for two months there were hundreds of thousands of U.S. forces on hand. During the exercise the U.S. committed vast amounts of nuclear capable assets, including two aircraft carriers. These forces are more than enough to fight a war. Special operations forces also participated.

What is notable is that the U.S. military exercises took off the mask of defence. They openly targeted the supreme headquarters and the strategic leadership of the DPRK. This clearly shows that the DPRK's nuclear possession was more than right. Nuclear war would have happened more than ten times if the DPRK had not possessed a nuclear deterrent.

Many nations other than America contend that the North's nuclear weapons are threatening and destabilizing. Why are they wrong?

Some people say the DPRK's nukes are a threat to world peace. To the contrary, it is certain that these weapons protect peace on the Korean peninsula, in Northeast Asia, and around the world. There were aggressive American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan which produced a flood of economic destruction and bloodshed. Earlier this year the U.S. launched a cruise missile attack on Syria.

The countries which fell into such miseries and tragedies were each and every one not strong enough to strike back. Without the DPRK's powerful military muscle, the center and core of which is nuclear weapons, the U.S. would have included the DPRK among these countries long ago.

As U.S. nuclear blackmail is going up instead of going down, the development of nuclear forces in both quality and quantity is more than justified. Therefore we will safeguard the peace and security of our country with our own efforts and contribute to world peace and stability.

What steps would you like to see the Trump administration take?

The Trump administration has to take major steps to bring an end the hostile policy against the DPRK. The word is transformed. The most pure example of the hostile policy is the nuclear blackmail and military exercises. Putting a halt to the joint military exercises is a prerequisite to an improvement in ties with the DPRK.

The administration also should terminate all the vicious moves, political, economic, and military, against the DPRK. The DPRK and U.S. are still in a technical state of war and should conclude a peace agreement. At the same time with peace talks all the U.S. forces and military hardware should go out of Korea. These are the steps that the Trump administration should take.

Was American student Otto Warmbier released in an attempt to encourage the Trump administration to negotiate?

On June 13th the court released Otto Wambier for humanitarian reasons. This was a policy from a humanitarian point of view. It had nothing to do with steps to be taken by the Trump administration.

The U.S. has been urging China to impose more sanctions on North Korea. How does Pyongyang see Beijing's role?

Whether Sino-U.S. relations get better or not is not our concern. We know the Trump administration has set forth its policy toward the DPRK of so-called maximum pressure and engagement and is focused on it. We think the main focus of this policy is maximum pressure which the U.S. hopes will bring the DPRK to its knees.

The Trump administration has realized that the power of the U.S. is limited in implementing this policy, which is why it has tried to make China and other countries join in and apply pressure. There are hardly any economic ties between the DPRK and the U.S. The Trump administration is focusing on economic ties between the DPRK and China. The U.S. is now trying to drive China to put pressure on the DPRK. What I want to point out is that if the Trump administration thinks this pressure and sanctions will work on the DPRK, there is nothing more preposterous than this.

For more than a half century U.S. administrations have seen the DPRK as a thorn in the flesh and have done everything to get it to its knees. The core of the strategic patience of the Obama administration was to put pressure on the DPRK and bring it to its knees. The essence of the Trump administration policy is parallel to past policies.

To state recent facts, though the core of Obama administration policy was sanctions, the DPRK has become a more powerful nuclear-possessing state and has developed into a political power and a military power. It also has achieved vast progress in gaining the characteristics of an economic power. Last year factories and enterprises surpassed the yearly plan. The northern part of our country was hit by a flood almost a year ago but the recovery was wrapped up within two months. We channeled the efforts of builders on the new science center Pyongyang to the north. Despite the change in plans the builders wound up the science center in the period of a year.

Would the DPRK trade a freeze in development of missiles and nuclear weapons in return for a suspension of U.S.-South Korean military exercises?

The halt of military exercises for a suspension or temporary freeze on the missile program is what we have already put on the table, but it is the U.S. that has said no. So that proposal is no longer valid. So what should be done right now? The U.S. should stop all of the hostile activities including the military exercises. The DPRK stance is as follows; if any enemy yesterday, makes up its mind today to change its hostile policy and to respect the sovereignty toward the DPRK and makes friends with the DPRK, then we're willing to improve our ties.

How does Pyongyang plan to deal with the newly elected government in South Korea?

I am an expert in American affairs. Our principle stand is that inter-Korean relations are an affair for the Korean nation. They are not an issue between different countries, but within the nation

itself. As principally an expert in American studies I am not in the position to give you a satisfactory answer. But I will point out our principled stance.

Inter-Korean relations were in the worst condition with Presidents Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak. If any politician keeps his or her arms crossed in the face of such ruined inter-Korean relations who can say they are doing their responsibility or getting the respect of their publics?

The main stance of the DPRK is that you should be willing to join anyone who respects your national interests and is prepared to improve relations. Also our stance is not to fight between compatriots and to safeguard national welfare. To this end both the North and South should respect each other and put an end to military confrontation. And should resolve all the other issues through dialog and negotiation. The North and South already have issued several declarations. They should faithfully implement these agreements.

What is the impact of economic sanctions?

As you might have witnessed, every single man and woman in Pyongyang have smiles on their faces and are filled with optimism for today and the future. Our single-hearted unity and belief in the Supreme Leader has become stronger than ever.

This is the outcome of U.S. sanctions which have persisted for more than a half century. Instead of falling down we are rising up. We are achieving self-development. The people will continue to move forward.

Whether China joins the U.S. in harsh sanctions or not, this does not have any influence on us. Instead of applying new pressure the Trump administration is well advised to be fully aware of the strong position of the DPRK and halt its hostile policy toward the DPRK. The Trump administration should see the DPRK as it really is and accordingly adjust its policy.

If the U.S. dropped its “hostile policy,” would the North be prepared to abandon its nuclear weapons?

Our nuclear weapons were produced from the standpoint that we should meet nukes with nukes. So if the U.S. drops its hostile policy and the nuclear weapons that go with it, we will think about the demand of the world along with the demand of the Korean peninsula. Given the fact that there are many more states possessing nuclear weapons, the U.S, Pakistan, India, China, France, Russia, we will think about the demand of the Korean peninsula if there is no more nuclear threat against the DPRK. That is my personal opinion.

First of all the U.S. nuclear threat should go. First the U.S. should terminate the nuclear threat to my country and the next condition is the world should be denuclearized. So what I mean by demand of the world, I know the U.S. possesses some 1500 nukes. All the nuclear weapons of the U.S., Russia, and China should go.

So the demand of the Korean peninsula could be considered parallel with the demand of the world regarding the U.S., UK, China, Russia. This is my personal point of view. I think it is too early to talk about it right now.

What would you tell President Trump?

In order to achieve peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, the U.S. should stop its hostile policy, its nuclear threats, its military threats. If the U.S. respects the sovereignty of the DPRK and is friendly, I don't see any reason we cannot become friends. I've heard a Western politician once said there is not any eternal enemy or friend, only interests.

The U.S. has been inflicting great losses on the DPRK for decades and now is seen as the sworn enemy of the DPRK people. But I don't see any reason for obstacles to improved ties between the two sides.

Lastly I want to stress that the U.S. is well-recommended to correct its awareness of the strength of the DPRK. The DPRK is a nuclear power and soon to become an economic power and on this basis the U.S. should establish its policy.

The interview concluded with Mr. Choe asking me two questions about the Trump administration. Like many other people around the world, he and his colleagues were unsure what to make of the new U.S. president.

My conversations with other North Koreans, some official and others in passing, were consistent with my interview with Mr. Choe. The official line is clearly established: the regime is strongly committed to its nuclear program and unlikely to trade it away. At the same time the younger Kim appears more committed than his father or grandfather to economic development, even as he seemingly embraces a form the "self-reliance" long promoted as part of the Juche philosophy. The Trump administration should be wary of putting itself in a corner, since it might find military action to be the only way out, and that course likely would be disastrous for everyone, starting with the South Koreans.

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